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Fooly Cooly

Volume 1

Yoji Enokido
GAINAX

POP FICTION

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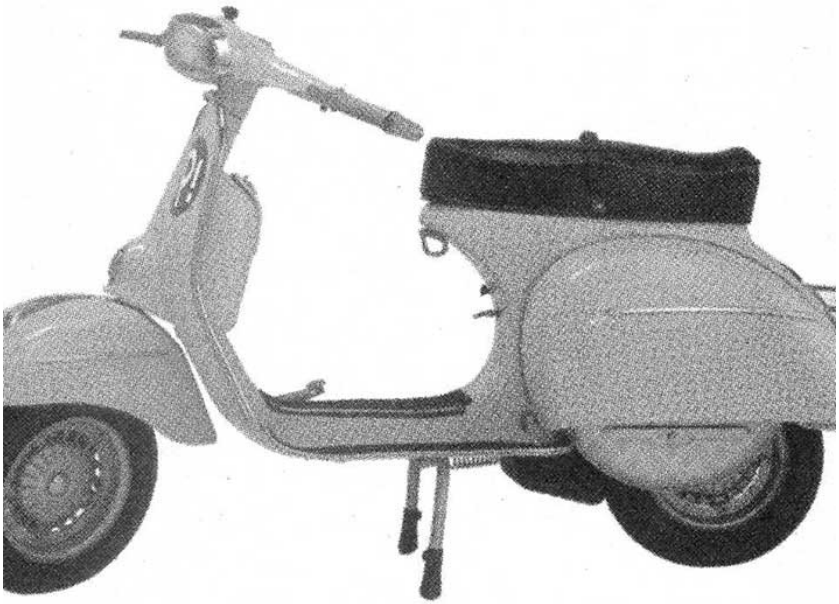
Naota's life is not simple. He lives with his eccentric father and grandfather in a city distinguished by a gigantic hand-iron shaped factory perched on hill. His brother's ex-girlfriend makes passes at him. And to top it all off, an impish, playful alien has run him over with her Vespa and smacked him in the head with a bass guitar! Little does he know that this is only the beginning of his involvement in an interplanetary ideological war.

Inspired by the FLCL anime.



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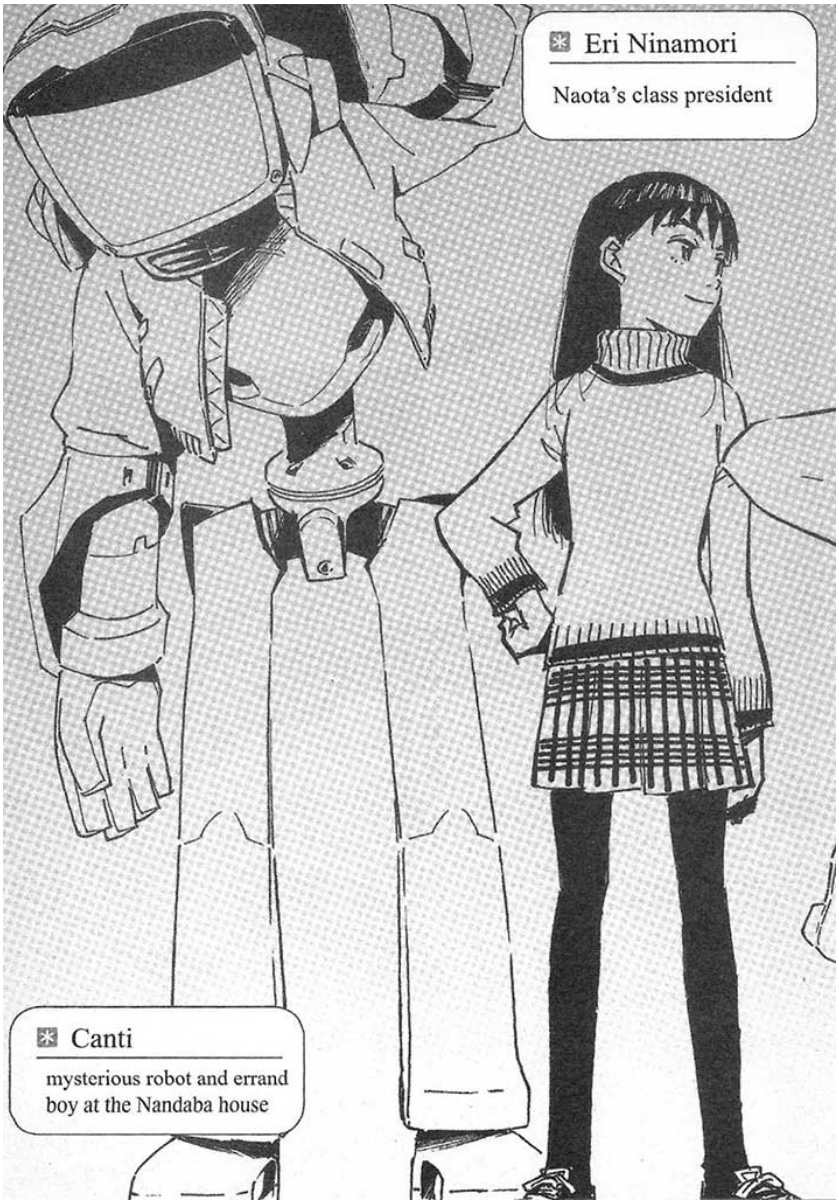
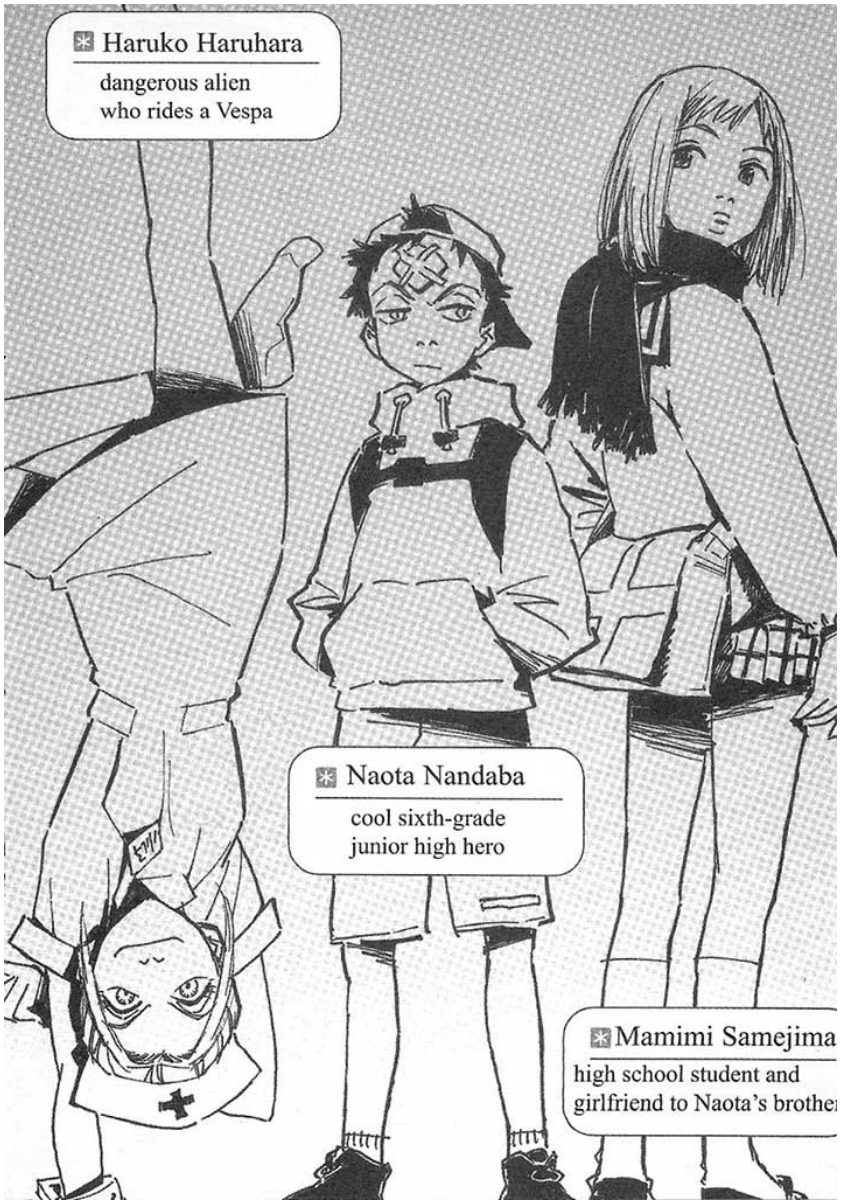
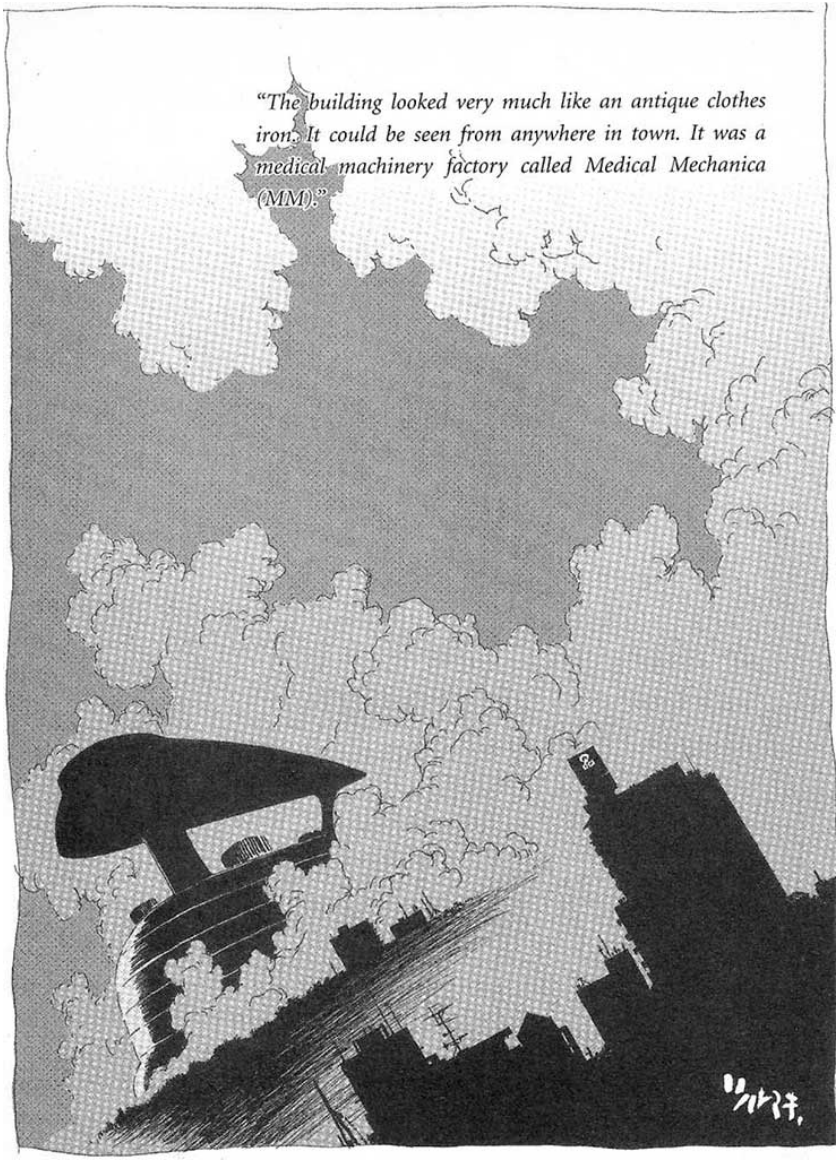

Eri Ninamori
Naota's class president
Canti
mysterious robot and errand boy at the Nandaba house


Haruko Haruhara
dangerous alien
who rides a Vespa
Naota Nandaba
cool sixth-grade
junior high hero
Mamimi Samejima
high school student and
girlfriend to Naota's brothe


"The building looked very much like an antique clothes iron. It could be seen from anywhere in town. It was a medical machinery factory called Medical Mechanica (MM)."

Chapter 1

This story has the potential to be considerably embarrassing for Naota.

Back then, Naota Nandaba was in sixth grade. He was getting pretty good grades and passing his classes without any issues. Secretly, he prided himself on being more mature than the other students his age.

"There are no true adults in this world," was one of Naota's favorite phrases. (However, when watching TV dramas, he did privately think that the famous actor Tetsuya Watari was a "true adult")

At the time, he was involved in a strange intimate relationship with Mamimi Samejima. Mamimi was a high school sophomore who always had her head in the clouds. She often cut class to play games on her mobile phone. And she appeared ready to drop out of school at any moment.

Naota didn't have a particular fetish for older girls, but he couldn't end this peculiar intimate relationship—"peculiar" because Naota had just started junior high. Although he had a healthy mind and body, the development of his body hadn't yet caught up to his cool persona.

Simply put, Naota was being toyed with. In truth, Mamimi probably didn't see Naota as the true object of her affection. At best, she regarded him as she might a beloved teddy bear or, perhaps, a pet hamster. No, maybe he wasn't worth as much as a pet… Naota was merely a substitute. A tragic substitute.

The saddest part about all this was she didn't really need him.

Nevertheless, whenever Naota took a breath of autumn air, memories of her came back to him. For a lot of reasons, autumn held special meaning for him.

His suburb, part of the city of Mabase, was the kind of town found anywhere. In front of the train station, a sculpture funded by a government grant soared unnecessarily high into the sky. A large river cut through both the countryside and the industrial town. On its banks, underneath Mabase Bridge, Naota and Mamimi often passed the time together. That was, unsurprisingly, where they were on the day *she* arrived.

On that day…

Mamimi was swinging Naota's baseball bat and rambling nonsense, as she always did. They were on their way home from school, so Mamimi still wore her school uniform.

Their after-school time was special. This free time spent in transition between the cages of school and home was an indispensable, undeniably meaningful part of growing up. The brief liberation offered a glimpse into the freedoms of the adult world.

When would they permanently obtain this free time? Would the day finally arrive when they would no longer have to study? With these questions in their hearts, they enjoyed their fleeting moments of freedom. "After school" was the special time children could act like real children.

However, despite this, Naota always sat on the riverbank, doing his homework or preparing for class. In the autumn breeze, Mamimi suspiciously eyed Naota, as he sat there with his textbook open.

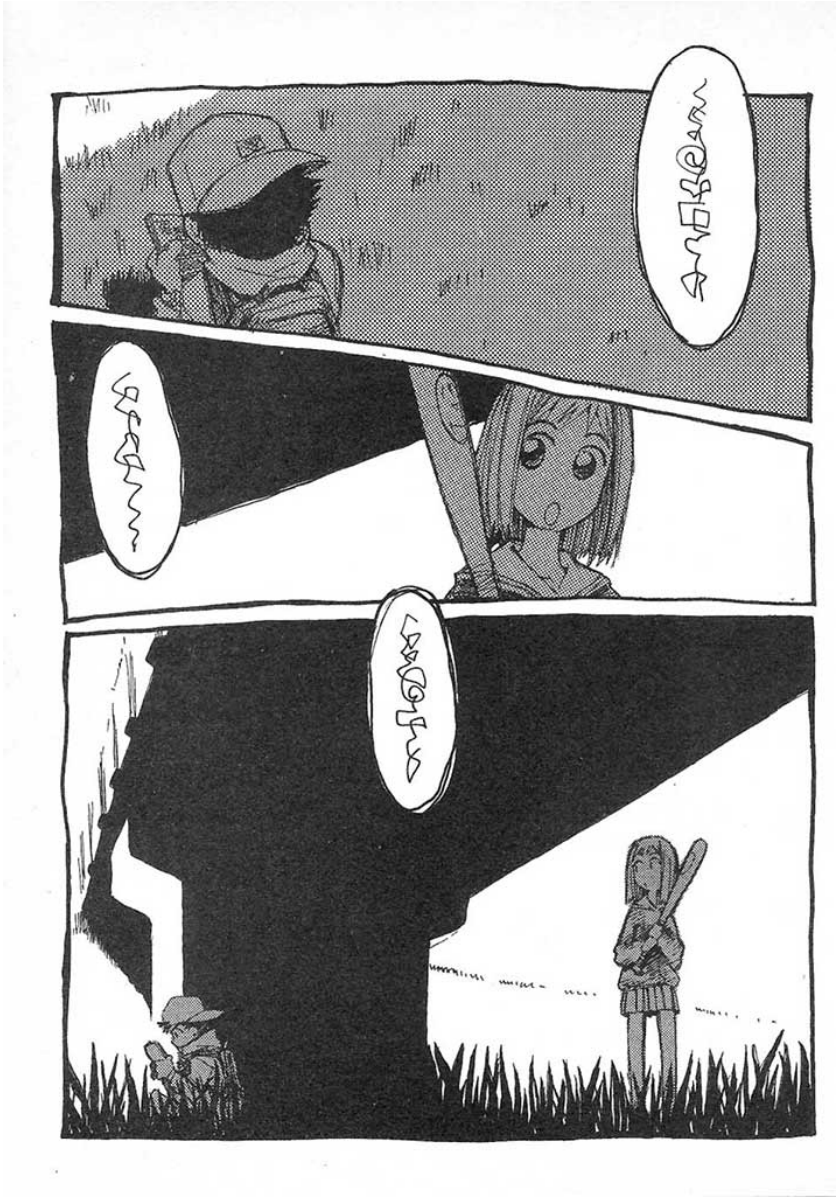
"Takkun, why are you studying?" Mamimi always called Naota "Takkun."

"Because I don't want to be stupid."

"Will you do my homework, too?"

Naota replied, "You'll turn into some demented woman, playing games all the time."

"What does 'demented' mean? You know such difficult words, Takkun."



He didn't respond.

To be honest, Naota didn't know what the word meant either. Did it have something to do with chewing gum? Didn't it refer to a girl who wandered aimlessly around town, constantly chewing gum?

No, no, no, no! He decided not to let Mamimi influence him. Anyway, he really didn't care for gum; he lived for Cool Mints.

"Why don't you study at home?" Mamimi asked.

"Because it isn't cool."

In reality, Naota disliked doing his homework where his father could see him. Specifically, he disliked the way his father mocked him for needing to study. Naota's grades were good whether he studied or not. Well, more accurately, he didn't want to show any interest in studying. Naota liked projecting a laid-back persona to avoid his father's bullying.

"What about you? Why do you always come here?" he asked.

Amused by Naota, Mamimi chuckled and responded, "Because…"

"Because…"

"Because I like it."

His pulse doubled, and he asked, "What is it that you like?"

"This place," Mamimi replied without any hesitation. Her tone betrayed her, as she clearly was thinking: "Don't tell me you thought I'd say 'Takkun.'"

He had to remember his role as a "substitute" boyfriend.

Mamimi, who had seen through Naota's expectations and answered cruelly, suddenly hugged him from behind, saying, "Playtime."

She put her hand on top of Naota's. Her hand was cool. Naota's hand, which was holding his pen, stiffened instantly; he'd been caught off-guard. He helped himself to another Cool Mint.

"You reek of cigarettes," he said.

"I haven't been smoking," murmured Mamimi.

On top of that dry, grassy hill, she draped herself over Naota. She

felt like a giant plush toy. Her soft breasts gently pressed against his back. Stroking his shoulders and arms, she started nibbling on his earlobe and neck.

Naota did nothing, staying silent for a while. He wasn't really calm enough to enjoy this, but that didn't mean he wanted to resist it. Whenever this happened, Naota's single choice was to let his body go with the flow.

"You know, what you're doing, does it mean—"

"I have to do it," she said. "If I don't, I'll overflow."

Overflow? What does she mean? What would happen if she overflowed? Although the growing boy's mind swelled with doubt and curiosity, he was unable to voice these questions while being caressed.

Mamimi hugged him tighter, kissing his neck. Every time they "played" like this, Naota, immersed in Mamimi's scent, looked up at the factory looming on the hill.

The building could be seen from anywhere in town. It looked very much like an antique clothes iron. It was a medical machinery factory called Medical Mechanica (MM), and when it first had been built, it caused quite a stir among the adults. Everyone had stood to benefit if Mabase became an industrial town; furthermore, they wouldn't have to worry about all the young people leaving to find jobs. By the time Naota was a sixth grader, almost everyone in town worked at the plant. When students said they had a part-time job, it inevitably meant they worked at MM. And when you took into account the related businesses that profited from the factory, the majority of Mabase citizens earned their livelihoods from it. The number of plant-associated facilities was increasing steadily, and they now included the MM Hospital, the MM Library, and an MM Croquet Park.

Several times a day, the factory spewed out clouds of steam. As Naota—with Mamimi still wrapped around him—watched the trail of white smoke ascend into the sky, he felt as if the steam was a culprit, stealing all the color from his world. Draining the world of color, the white plume of smoke dispersed into a semitransparent

haze that silently covered the entire town.

"Yum."

Mamimi nibbled lightly on Naota's neck.

There is nothing amazing in this world. Everything is ordinary.

This kind of game that Mamimi enjoyed—it, too, was nothing special. Naota thought to himself that reality was merely a flat, tiresome world.

After playtime finished, Naota stood up and put a coin in the nearby vending machine. The inside of his mouth was dry. He felt as if he'd swallowed the same saliva over and over again today. He was about to push the iced coffee button, when Mamimi's finger, which was right next to his, pushed the button for lemonade first.

"Hey! I don't like sour drinks!" Naota protested.

Ignoring him, Mamimi retrieved the can, yanked up the tab, and gulped down the contents.

"Sponging off a junior high kid?"

"Oops, I left a mark." Mamimi touched the fresh bruise—a love bite—on Naota's neck. "What will you do—hide it with a bandage?"

There was no response.

Naota knew he was losing the argument. He, Naota Nandaba, looked upon by so many as the "Cool Mint" of the class, was at a complete loss. A high school girl with papaya-flavored bubblegum for brains was screwing with him.

Mamimi stopped drinking and offered the can to Naota.

"What?" asked Naota.

"It's yours, isn't it? There's still half left."

Taking the can from her, Naota glanced at Mamimi's mouth.

Her lips, moistened with lemonade, looked glistening and alluring… moments earlier, they had been sweeping across his skin. Though they had caressed his neck and ears countless times, Naota's lips hadn't kissed them before—not once. Mamimi had refused stubbornly whenever Naota tried. It was the one thing she wouldn't do. Touching their lips together was forbidden.

It wasn't because she wanted to be a relentless tease. The real reason weighed heavily on his heart.

Mamimi called him "Takkun," and Naota knew why. Mamimi had explained she'd taken the "ta" from his name and added "kun" as an endearment. It was a far-fetched explanation—a papaya-flavored explanation.

Naota's older brother, Tasuku, currently was studying in America on a baseball scholarship. Mamimi was really Tasuku's girlfriend, and she wouldn't kiss her "substitute" boyfriend. When she and Tasuku were together, she called *him* "Takkun."

Naota threw the can into the street.

"Hey, empty cans go in the recycle bin!"

It wasn't empty, though. The half-full can arced through the sky before rolling along the ground.

In the back of Naota's mind, he remembered a certain letter—a Pandora's box that constantly agitated his memory. Enclosed in that letter was a photo of Tasuku with a blonde girl.

"You know," he began, having difficulty finding the words, "my brother, in America, he…"

Mamimi's eyes turned suddenly grave. Her expression was more serious than when she'd rejected Naota's kiss.

In retrospect, she must have known by then; or at least, she must have had an inkling. Naota had no way of knowing that at the time, however.

Should I open it? Should I finally open this Pandora's box now? Maybe I

won't be able to spend time with Mamimi on the riverbank anymore. Should I really open it? Do I really want to lose these moments after school when Mamimi fools around with me?

Sooner or later, he'd have to say it. He had to tell her.

Tell her.

"In America, my brother, he…"

Don't hesitate: Say it now!

Suddenly… yes, it happened right then. The two of them, lost in the seriousness of the moment, had forgotten their surroundings. Thus, they didn't notice the sound of the approaching bike until a moment too late.

"*Itadaki*-mammoth!" With this incomprehensible shout, the girl on the bike aimed straight for Naota.

The bike was a scooter. It was, unmistakably, an imported Vespa.

The Vespa girl pulled out an electric guitar that was strapped across her back, getting ready to hit Naota with it as she drove by.

What? It's a psychopath! was Naota's first thought. *She must be insane!*

The guitar she wielded came at him with tremendous speed, and Naota's knees buckled with fear.

This is it. I'm so dead. Here it comes.

Just then…

"Eh?" said the Vespa girl.

The can of lemonade Naota recently had discarded caught on the Vespa's front wheel, and the girl lost control.

She let out a strange sound: "Rarararararara!"

Out of the frying pan and into the fire. Just as Naota thought he

would be all right, things got worse.

The Vespa itself sailed straight at Naota; the impact sent his body flying. He tumbled along the road. The Vespa girl's shout was the last thing he heard before all the lights went out in his brain.

Mamimi cried out and ran toward Naota's body, which lay limply on the ground. "Takkun!"

"Stop!" commanded the shrill voice belonging to the Vespa girl. Having parked the bike next to them, the girl haughtily ordered Mamimi in English, "Stop, native girl."

Mamimi wasn't very good with English, but she had a vague idea what those words meant. Though she had absolutely no obligation to obey this odd girl, Mamimi was weak-willed. She stopped dead in her tracks. She froze, humorously, like a punching doll that had come back up after having been tipped over.

"Taro has hit his head, so he shouldn't be moved," said the girl in a language Mamimi could understand well. She got off her Vespa and approached Naota.

OK she speaks Japanese, Mamimi thought. She had assumed they would be unable to communicate.

"Uh, but his name is Naota, not Taro." Mamimi added unnecessarily, "I call him Takkun."

The girl bent over and put her ear to Naota's chest, as though to assess his condition. She acted as if she had experience with this sort of thing—but watching her, it was obvious that she was a fraud.

"Taro is dead!" she proclaimed suddenly in a tone of utter surprise. "This boy is completely—yes, utterly—dead, Taro-style."

Mamimi thought to herself, "This girl isn't all there."

When the Vespa girl removed her helmet, Mamimi was surprised to discover that she was a beauty. Her eyes were like green apples or pale emeralds. Where could she be from? Maybe they were colored contacts? Upon closer examination, her skin tone was oddly different from that of a normal Japanese person.

Perhaps thanks to her instincts as a high school delinquent, Mamimi guessed that this was no ordinary girl. Mamimi could feel the strength emanating from the other girl's skin. Those green eyes

shone with greed and a totally unrestrained wildness. They were the eyes of someone strong, and Mamimi thought they were pretty cool.

"Oh no! I killed him! I finally find the cure for the weather, and then I go and kill him! Argh! Come back to me!"

"Oh!" Mamimi exclaimed, watching as the girl suddenly kissed Naota—presumably in an attempt to give mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

The kiss was deep. Without hesitation. Prolonged.

This was bad. Mamimi knew she should do something, but she couldn't decide how to react to the situation unfolding before her.

Mamimi Samejima was fond of smoking and often ditched school. She liked to think of herself as a person to whom rules and regulations didn't apply. However, this crazy girl—who had run over a junior high kid with her bike, knocked him unconscious, and then kissed him—was far beyond her realm of experience. What could Mamimi possibly do in an emergency like this?

That was it! She had a cell phone, so she could call the police. Just as Mamimi thought of a plan, Naota started coming around, still in the girl's embrace.

Finally, the Vespa girl separated her mouth from his and said, "I did it! Taro, I brought you back to life!"

"I told you, he isn't called Taro," Mamimi asserted again.

"Oh, really? That's good! If he had been Taro, that would have been a real problem. He'd definitely be dead by now. Lucky me!"

Inexplicably delighted, while the poor boy was coming to, the girl raised her guitar and slammed it with all her might onto Naota's head.

Mamimi did nothing but watch the violence, completely stunned.

"Hm, did I miss? It isn't coming out," the girl muttered

incomprehensibly, looking at the bracelet on her left arm.

It wasn't a watch, rather some kind of accessory that Mamimi hadn't seen before. The gold band around the girl's wrist had a short chain attached.

Looking at the chain, the Vespa girl shook her head. She started rattling Naota's head, saying, "This is no good. Maybe I'll try again."

As the girl once again readied her lethal guitar, Mamimi ran over and embraced Naota, attempting to shield him.

"I'm about to hit his head, so please don't move him."

With a critical look, Mamimi faced the other girl.

Naota, who had regained full consciousness right then, opened his mouth and asked, "What did you do?"

"What? CPR, of course!"

"Not that," he said, instinctively wiping his moist lips.

"Did she stick her tongue in?" Mamimi asked.

Naota was at a loss for words. Against his will, he had received his first kiss. Moreover, it had a spicy curry taste.

It was terrible.

His biggest problem wasn't that his first kiss had been foisted upon him, but that Mamimi had seen it. A speechless Mamimi stared at Naota.

What's that? It was the sound of a Vespa engine. When they looked up, they saw the girl was on the seat, ready to flee.

"Thanks for nothing!" she yelled to Naota; then, she accelerated away at full speed.

What was that all about? She was a lunatic who had come like a bolt out of the blue.

The Vespa, rapidly getting farther and farther away, seemed to be expensive. Watching the girl's figure grow smaller, Mamimi voiced her sentiments, "That must feel so good."

"Good?"

"Being free." Naota didn't reply.

"She was older than twenty, huh?" Mamimi continued. "An idiotic adult who still hasn't grown up," said Naota. "Ouch!"

The wound left by the guitar suddenly hurt. And that was how Naota met *her*.

Chapter 2

The Nandaba family business was a bakery. It had been started by his grandfather Shigekuni, so the shop was called "Shigekuni Bakery." When Shigekuni retired, he passed the family business to Naota's father, Kamon.

Kamon wasn't Shigekuni's son by blood, rather a man who had married into the family. He had been working at a publishing house when he'd met Shigekuni's only daughter, whom he later married.

When their eldest son, Tasuku, was born, Kamon and his wife had moved to her hometown, thinking that Mabase was where they would like to raise their children. However, the boys lost their mother before Naota had entered kindergarten. Naota had been told she wasn't dead, but that her whereabouts were unknown.

So, Naota's family now consisted of his grandfather, Shigekuni; his father, Kamon; his brother, Tasuku, who currently was studying in America; and finally, Naota himself. It was a household made up of four men.

They also had an old pet cat called Miyu Miyu. Miyu Miyu was fairly fat, and when he wailed, he sounded like a wild boar.

Speaking of the cat, Naota remembered one particular occurrence. It had occurred right after their mother had disappeared and a large typhoon had hit Mabase.

On one side of the Nandaba house was a river; both banks were reinforced by six feet of concrete. Normally, the water level wasn't very high—but due to the typhoon, the current had transformed into violent rapids. The water level rose, raging along like a muddy waterfall.

Alone, the young Naota was watching the muddy river from his bedroom window when he saw a small kitten floating downstream in a cardboard box. He thought the kitten looked at him. He cried out, but the kitten was carried off into the distance. From his place

at the second-floor window, there was nothing Naota could have done.

Naota never told anyone about it—but six months later, Kamon brought home a cat. Around this time, Kamon had begun leaving the house for frequent walks. Thinking back, maybe his dad had been looking for his missing wife, or perhaps he simply was wandering around in shock. Naota never knew. One day, Kamon brought home a cat and cared for it, saying they wouldn't have to worry about pests in the bakery anymore. From that point on, Kamon changed his careless ways and started taking the bakery seriously.

Maybe that cat—now their pet, Miyu Miyu—was the kitten that Naota had seen floating down the stream. He couldn't, however, remember any distinguishing characteristics of the kitten that would substantiate this theory.

During long nights, he often reminisced about various things in the faraway past. This was one of those nights.

I can't sleep. Naota was lying awake on the bed, curled up like a fetus. *Can't sleep. Can't sleep. Can't sleep*.

A chill ran down his back. For some reason, he couldn't calm down. *Maybe I've caught a cold?*

He didn't want to think about it, but he couldn't keep the idea out of his mind that the Vespa girl might have passed something on to him when she'd kissed him earlier.

He remembered the touch of the Vespa girl's lips from that afternoon. His first kiss had had a spicy curry flavor.

That flavor. I need to forget about that. It was like a bad accident.

He turned over, and the bed creaked.

It was a bunk bed, and Naota slept in the bottom bunk. The top bunk belonged to his brother, Tasuku. Although Tasuku was out of the country, Naota couldn't use it. After all, in a small room shared by two people, the bunks were the single sacred space the two

brothers had.

"Good, Naota. I'll take the top bunk, and you take the bottom," Tasuku had said.

I'm always at the bottom of things.

If his brother did become a professional baseball player, their father probably hoped Naota would continue the family business.

Naota raised his head from the covers, sighing. It would be hard to sleep tonight. Thinking he might have a fever, Naota put his hand on his forehead.

What is this?

On his forehead was a large bulge.

A large bulge!

A large bulge!

A LARGE BULGE!

What is this? Am I dreaming? Trying to process the surrealism of the situation, he kicked off the covers and sat up. *Calm down. I have to calm down.*

He touched his forehead in an attempt to assess the situation.

"Ouch!" he cried out reflexively as an intense pain suddenly shot through him.

At the same time, from the center of his forehead, he felt a pulsing sensation. *Ba-dum… ba-dum… ba-dum.*

It was a bit like the drunken feeling he'd experienced when Grandfather Shigekuni had given him a little alcohol—but he hadn't touched a drop of booze.

Ba-dum… ba-dum… ba-dum. His head pounded as if it had a heart inside. No, the bulge itself was throbbing.

Naota's face turned pale as he examined the bulge more gently.

As he'd imagined, it was a single, hard, long bulge—about five inches long, it extended straight out from his forehead. If he grasped it firmly, the part connected to his head hurt. *What is this?*

Then, Naota remembered that the Vespa girl had hit his head with her guitar that afternoon. Mamimi had said they should go to the hospital; after all, a bike had hit him. Although nothing seemed wrong, he really should have gone to get checked out by a doctor. He had ignored her, saying that all he had were bruises. With Mamimi there, he had played up his "Cool Mint" image.

If I'd gone to the hospital then maybe this wouldn't have happened, he thought. *Ouch!*

Ba-dum… ba-dum… ba-dum…

Naota turned on the light and put on his glasses.

No, it wasn't a dream: There really was something sticking out of his head. A dark blue object projected straight from his forehead. The object actually was less swollen than it was angular. In fact, "horn" was a more suitable description than "bulge."

There's a horn growing from my forehead. What kind of illness is this?

He recalled the diseases described in horror comics—like those in the beginning of "Black Jack" — rather than any conditions found in more realistic media. *What could this illness be?* Maybe it was some kind of hereditary disease that hadn't manifested in his grandfather or father, but had awakened due to this afternoon's trauma?

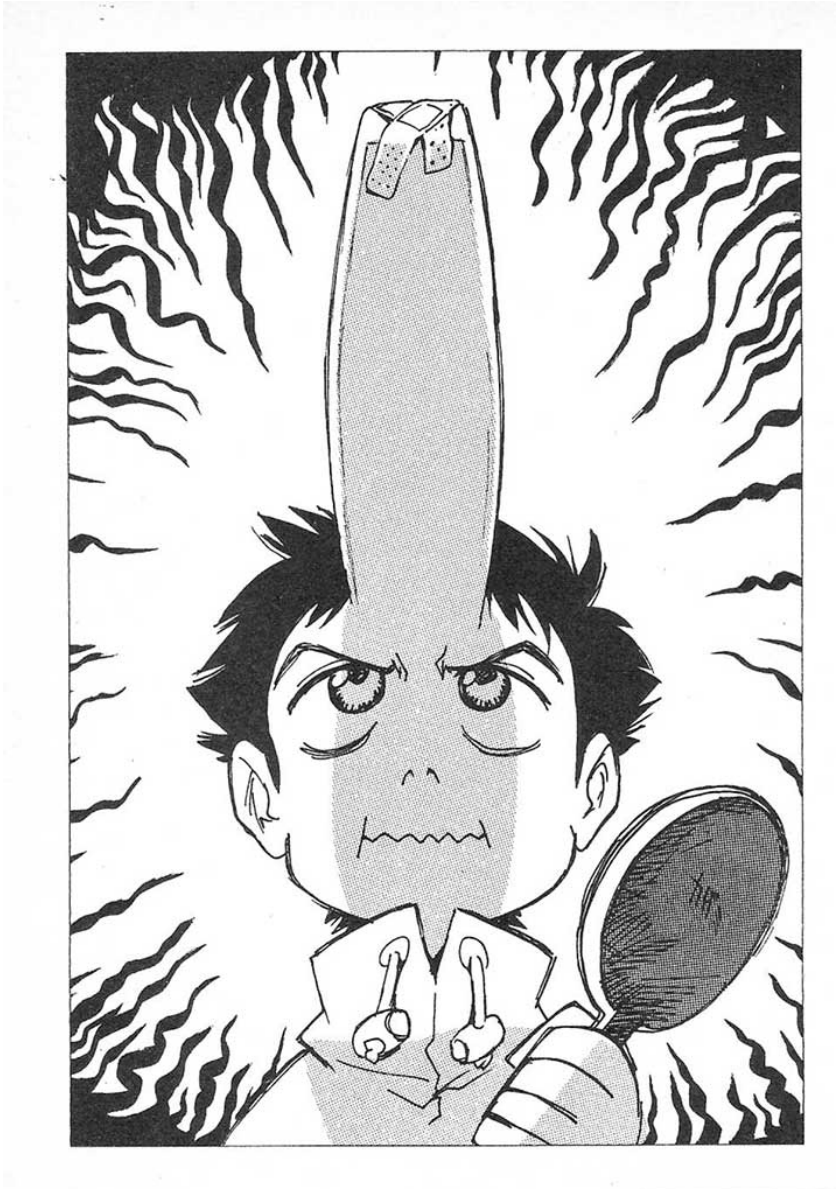
No, calm down and think about this scientifically. That's right! I've heard of advanced frontal lobe development in people who are patient. Maybe I've been too patient, so my frontal lobe has grown deformed. Argh! That's not scientific at all!

Naota was overcome with anxiety.

Then, he received another shock: With each pulse, the horn grew a little bigger.

Ba-dum… ba-dum… ba-dum.

This was no a joke!



Naota panicked and pushed down on the growth. Unexpectedly, the horn easily retracted into his skull. At the same time, the throbbing

pain eased, as well.

In the silent room, the only sound was the ticking of the clock.

After he'd pushed the horn back in completely, everything seemed to have been merely a bad dream. Had he been asleep, after all?

Yes, he must have been dreaming. Logically speaking, that was the best explanation.

Please, God!

Fearfully, he removed his hand from his head.

Apparently, God was not in a good mood that night. Left alone, the horn kept growing. *Ba-dum… ba-dum… ba-dum…*

It looks like I'll have to keep pushing it in forever. Naota trembled as he wondered: *What the hell am I going to do? There's no one I can talk to about this. I don't want anyone to know.*

And what am I going to do about school tomorrow? Naota Nandaba thought of these details, even in the midst of such an unusual situation. *Well, I'll have to figure out some kind of solution at least for the time being.*

The next day, Naota stuck a bandage over his forehead.

One of his female classmates, Eri Ninamori, called out to him as he neared the school gates. "Morning, Naota!"

"Hey," he answered indifferently, quickly heading toward the entrance.

He'd used an extra-strength bandage on his forehead to make sure his horn didn't burst out. He'd made doubly sure of this by adding a few additional drops of superglue. (Imagine the horrors he'd face when the time came to peel it off.)

Anyone who thinks that maybe he'd gone a bit too far obviously

hasn't known the distress caused by having a horn sprout from one's head. However, Naota Nandaba did have a strange horn growing from his head.

Naota, the devil.

He couldn't let anyone know the terrible truth. It certainly wouldn't fit his persona. However, his bandage was pretty noticeable, as it was stuck right in the middle of his forehead.

He knew what would happen: Making such an effort to hide something would, of course, paradoxically generate interest and attract prying eyes. If only they would appear less interested… a bandage itself was commonplace enough. Perhaps people would think he'd grazed himself and then covered the wound with a bandage—nothing extraordinary about that.

Naturally, that wasn't the way things would go.

"What happened to you?" Ninamori asked.

"Huh?"

"The bandage."

"Oh, that…" began Naota. "Um, yesterday, my grandpa and a door-to-door solicitor had a massive fight. I tried to stop it, and I ended up with this!"

Naota related the story he'd prepared in advance. He'd been worried that if he claimed to have bumped into a lamppost or something like that, it would sound suspicious, thus further heightening people's curiosity. Although it didn't really matter if people discovered that some girl had hit him with her Vespa, it was an outlandish tale. He'd decided describing a realistic-sounding story was better than describing the unbelievable actual reality.

In this world, there always will be meddlers who, seeing through the camouflage, feel they must stick in their noses. And thus, here was Ninamori, a perfect example of this type of person. Because her father served as Mabase's mayor, she remained aware of her "princess" persona. She was class president, the sort of person who

unfailingly would help out her friends with any problems whatsoever, and who delighted in her teachers' approval. (Indeed, she was also the first to report a schoolmate for skipping classroom cleaning duty.)

Most troublesome of all, she seemed to treat Naota with a strange sense of camaraderie because of his excellent grades. She often sought to confer with him, no matter how run-of-the-mill a matter might be.

"That looks awfully strange. It doesn't suit you," opined Ninamori, looking at Naota's bandage. "You sure you're not hiding something?"

She had unusually good intuition.

I really hate this girl! Naota thought to himself.

It was still early, but Gaku was already in the classroom. He and Naota had been in the same class since the third grade. He was a hot-blooded guy with a clean-shaven head and horn-rim glasses. Stretched out, he was reading an "Adults' Illustrated Weekly." As expected, upon seeing the bandage, Gaku asked if Naota had injured himself; then, he let the subject drop.

"Anyway, did you hear, Naota? That light-speed Vespa showed up again."

"Light-speed Vespa?" Naota repeated.

"You hadn't heard? Recently, over on the national freeway, people have been seeing a Vespa-riding girl carrying a guitar pretty frequently."

"What's a 'light-speed Vespa'?" asked Ninamori.

"A Vespa is, well, a Vespa. It's a scooter. That goes fast."

"A light-speed Vespa…" Naota said.

Without a doubt, Naota was recalling his encounter with the girl

from the previous day, who had given him a curry-flavored kiss. It had to be her. If that outrageous girl had been turning up all over town, of course she would have become the subject of conversation.

"According to the rumors, she always appears in front of people who are doing things they shouldn't," continued Gaku. "She stole a spicy curry roll from Kumiko in class and—"

"A curry roll? What was it she shouldn't have been doing?"

Gaku grinned suggestively before whispering, "Kumiko was sharing a diary with Koji from Class Three."

"Is that supposed to be pervy?"

"Anyway, the story goes that if the light-speed Vespa touches a person who's being a pervert, then the 'devil's mark' appears on that person's body somewhere. Kumiko said she hasn't experienced anything like that, but it's still weird. People with the mark eventually will be destroyed by the light-speed Vespa girl."

The devil's mark?

This was terrifying information. Generally, Naota wasn't one to listen to such crude urban myths; but this time, the circumstances were entirely different.

The devil's mark. Could it be the horn that had appeared on his head…?

Suddenly, Ninamori pointed at Naota's neck and asked, "Hey, what's that?"

"The devil's mark?" Gaku said, sneaking a look.

"Of course not. That's ridiculous."

They were looking at the love bite Mamimi had given him yesterday. Normally, he would have tried to hide it—but today, with a horn growing out of his head, it had managed to have slipped his mind.

"Have you been doing something you shouldn't have?"

"What do you mean? Of course not."

People being perverted? Don't be absurd. Mamimi and I do that kind of thing all the time, Naota thought to himself. *It isn't the devil's mark…*

Naota pulled up his collar to hide his neck. Ninamori glanced at Naota's bandage, but she didn't say anything about it in front of Gaku.

Several classmates asked about his bandage, but Naota gave appropriate excuses and was able to endure a normal school day.

After school, Naota ran out of the classroom as soon as the bell rang. He started walking home alone, taking a different road than usual.

Naota had two routes he typically took home. One was the normal after-school route. This was the "children, please don't loiter along the road, be sure not to talk to strangers, and go straight home" path. The other way, passing Mabase Bridge, was the road he took for his rendezvous with Mamimi.

In truth, the two of them never made plans to meet up. Sometimes, when Naota went to the bridge, Mamimi would be there also. And if Mamimi went to the bridge, then Naota coincidentally might be there, too. If, on a whim, they decided to come to the bridge, then, occasionally, they would hang out.

The bridge had become their rock, their safety zone.

There had been many times when Mamimi hadn't shown up, and Naota had spent the time alone on the river bank; conversely, there were days when Mamimi had spent time there on her own.

Obviously, the real reason either of them went there was to see the other… but if they made a promise to meet, their relationship would take a strange turn. Naota and Mamimi both feared that kind of commitment, though they were only half aware of this.

Today, however, Naota hadn't chosen either of these paths.

I think I'll go to the hospital after all.

He didn't have much hope that they could get rid of his horn at the hospital. To tell the truth, he wouldn't have been surprised in the least if there wasn't a name for his condition. Naota didn't know what else to do, though. He prayed it might be a simple sickness, something with a cure.

Naota already had prepared for this trip before leaving home that morning, taking his health insurance card with him. Now, he headed to the largest hospital in the city.

As he waited at the crosswalk, a honking train passed in front of Naota.

The barrier lifted, and Naota heard the sound of a bike engine idling right next to him. He stiffened. Reflexively, the color drained from his face, and he sucked in a breath. A jolt of fear ran down his spine. Just as he'd dreaded, it was the Vespa girl from the previous day. Yesterday, he had been in complete shock during their encounter. Today, however, he had the fear of a child who, already having been stung previously, now came across another wasp.

This particular wasp took a bite of her spicy curry roll. There could be no mistake: This had to be the light-speed Vespa girl that Gaku had been talking about. If the rumors were true, then that had to be the food she had taken from the kid.

The barrier had risen, but Naota remained stationary. After all, it might be a mistake to rile up an opponent such as this one.

"Hey, there," she said with an overly familiar manner, "did anything happen after yesterday afternoon? Anything weird?"

You were the weirdest thing, Naota thought.

"Something did, didn't it?"

"What are you talking about—something 'weird'?" he asked.

The girl noticed the bandage on Naota's forehead, and she seemed delighted. "Then, what's with the bandage?"

"You hit me yesterday! Remember?"

"That looks awfully strange. It doesn't suit you." The girl eyed Naota's forehead with suspicion, repeating the same thing that Ninamori had said that morning: "Looks to me like you're hiding something."

He couldn't speak. *Does she know about the horn?*

For a moment, Naota hesitated, considering whether he should ask the girl about the changes taking place in his body. However, he had second thoughts when he spied the guitar on her back.

No, he had to get away as quickly as possible. If he spoke to her further, then she might turn violent on him again. This time, she might beat him to death! She was a total maniac.

Once again, the warning bell for the train crossing sounded, and the barrier began to descend. Seizing the opportunity, Naota waited for the barrier to lower almost completely before running across.

Turning, he saw that the girl was still in the same place, watching Naota, her hand shielding her eyes.

The train passed by, separating them.

Look at you now!

Naota fled as fast as he could.

The MM-affiliated hospital was Mabase's largest medical center.

The MM company proclaimed itself the world's leader in groundbreaking medical technology, and its hospital facilities were the best in the country. They had twenty beds in the ER alone, and

the intensive care unit contained thirty beds. These facilities far exceeded the requirements of Mabase's population of sixty thousand.

Light flooded through the skylight, filtering into the sparkling clean lobby.

Neurology, internal medicine, orthopedic surgery… Naota paused for a moment, deciding what department to try. Eventually, he went to reception and signed in for a cerebral surgery appointment before entering the diagnosis room.

Looking around at the room's high-tech equipment (such as the CT scanner and the MRI machine), his heart filled with hope. This really was a technological medical machinery manufacturer's hospital. He felt reassured. Here, they had to have at least some idea of what his strange affliction was and why it was affecting him.

A nurse, her back still turned to Naota, flipped through a chart.

"Um…" he began.

"Please, lie down on the bed."

Following the nurse's instruction, Naota reclined upon the cold bed.

"Please, close your eyes and relax," she continued. "What happened to you?"

"Um… well…" Naota trailed off.

"This is a hospital. You can tell me anything, including things about your growing pains," the nurse said encouragingly. "You don't have to be embarrassed here."

"No, it's nothing like that. It's this completely strange thing."

"What kind of thing?"

"How to describe it…?"

"Please, don't be embarrassed," the nurse reiterated.

"It's some kind of bulge."

"When it comes to teenage problems, a bulge is completely normal. How long has it been going on?"

"In the middle of the night, it just…"

"Always in the middle of the night," noted the nurse.

"Urn, it's right in the center of my forehead."

"So, it's under that bandage?"

Naota explained, "Yes. You see, if I don't keep it pressed down, then it pushes out."

"Very eager, isn't it? I understand."

"Eh?"

"It's Flictonic Clipple Webber Syndrome—a psychogenetic disorder, manifesting during puberty, in which a section of skin hardens. With this disease, if the child overexerts himself, a horn grows out from the forehead."

That doesn't sound real!

Naota finally realized, with shock, that he recognized the nurse's voice. Panicking, he opened his eyes to see the nurse was, indeed, the Vespa girl.

"When did you—?" he began.

"So, what do you have, exactly, under that bandage?"

"What are you doing here?"

"You thought you'd managed to ditch me?" she asked, grinning boldly as she suddenly pulled out her electric guitar.

As one might expect, Naota jumped off the bed and ran.

Is she really a nurse here?

Naota had no idea the real nurse was tied up in the waiting room, wearing merely her underwear; she was lying alongside the doctor, who was currently unconscious.

"Don't run," the Vespa girl said. "The fun's just begun!"

"You must be kidding!"

The person bearing the devil's mark will be destroyed by the light-speed Vespa girl.

As though chased by a carnivorous beast, Naota fled the hospital as fast as his legs would carry him.

It was a living nightmare.

Chapter 3

When he finally reached home, Naota collapsed on his bed, exhausted.

His heart kept pounding. He hadn't run this much since he'd been in a marathon.

What's this all about?

The situation was worse than it had been the previous night. Now, this girl Naota thought he'd met accidentally was, inarguably, hunting him.

Light-speed Vespa… Obviously, she wasn't an ordinary girl.

Without hesitation, she'd caused absolute mayhem: driving her bike down the hospital corridors, breaking through glass doors, speeding through a crowded street. She'd even flattened the phone booth Naota had popped into.

For the first time, Naota felt happy simply to be alive.

I got away, didn't I? I managed to get home alive, right?

Whenever he saw that chaotic maniac, it inevitably signaled trouble.

Additionally, the horn continued to grow out of his head. That girl probably would follow him, so now he couldn't go to a different hospital. Speaking of hospital visits, the girl had noticed the bandage.

Maybe she'd given him some kind of terrible virus along with that curry-flavored kiss. Maybe there was nothing he could do to make the horn go away. Maybe he really would have it for the rest of his life.

Was that why the girl was after Naota?

Is it really the devil's mark? he wondered. *Will it get bigger? Am I going to die? Or—*

Suddenly, his father, Kamon, loudly hollered for him to come downstairs for supper. It was dinnertime already.

In the Nandaba household, meals were formal "gather 'round the table" family affairs. Every morning and evening (and afternoon, when it wasn't a school day), Naota joined his father and grandfather for meals. He had thought it was perfectly normal until recently, when he'd discovered that things weren't the way he'd once thought.

Among his classmates, many didn't eat with their families as much as one time per week. Whereas adults might pity these children, Naota, by contrast, envied them a little. Eating alone was cool. It seemed like the first step to living independently.

However, eating alone wasn't allowed in the Nandaba household. His father rigidly enforced this policy. It seemed to have some special meaning for Kamon. It didn't matter if you weren't hungry, or if you were running a fever, or if you had one—or three—horns growing out of your head. You still had to stick to the mealtime ritual.

So, Naota went downstairs to eat.

His family wasn't the kind he could discuss his problems with. Should he catch a cold or something similar, all he could expect in return was a scolding to take better care of himself.

And then… Naota, who had come downstairs, froze when he looked into the room: There she was… right there! The Vespa girl!

"Yo," the girl greeted him casually. As before, her tone was overly familiar. She was sitting with Kamon and Shigekuni, happily sipping miso soup.

Naota began, "You…"

"Let me introduce you," Kamon said. "Starting today, we have a beautiful new housekeeper, so welcome her. Her name is Haruko Haruhara."

"This miso soup is a little bland," stated the girl. "The broth isn't very good."

"I'm very sorry," Kamon apologized. "I'll be more careful tomorrow."

"What? A housekeeper?"

Naota actually meant to say, "Why is this girl the housekeeper?" and "Why, if we have a housekeeper, did you cook dinner, Dad?"

He noticed that his dad sported a bandage.

"Ah, I got hit in a bad accident today," explained Kamon.

"By a bike?"

"Yes, by a bike—and also by Haruko, in other words. You know what a sucker your dad is for love…"

Behind his thick glasses, Kamon's eyes were intense. He used to work in Central City as a magazine editor, and he liked growing his hair long and tying it back so that he could pass as some kind of intellectual.

"How can you say that with a straight face, Dad?"

"What's the issue?" asked Haruko, pursing her lips and defending Naota's father. "Everyone needs love, until they die."

Encouraged by her support, Kamon plucked up the courage to ask, "Oh, by the way, Haruko, what do you think—which of these roles do you like?"

"Which do I like?"

"The 'oh, Mister Editor, I didn't know you had such a young wife' kind of dream? Or—no, no, no—perhaps you prefer the 'my hubby is a professional dough roller' model? That's a fine choice, too."

"A shame he didn't die when he got hit," Shigekuni casually remarked.

"That's so mean," Kamon protested to his father-in-law, "especially after I hired Haruko to come and live with us to help you out, Father."

Give me a break, thought Naota.

Haruko sat between Kamon and Shigekuni, and it looked like a fierce love triangle was developing. Naota's head already ached from the horn; he wasn't about to allow this new mayhem in his home.

"Do we really need a housekeeper?" he asked.

"This housekeeper saw things," said Haruko, glancing sideways at Naota and giving him a knowing smile. "She saw Taro fondling a girl."

"You know I'm not Taro!"

"Fondling?" Kamon homed in on Haruko's assertion, demanding, "Who?"

"No one!"

"Who have you been fondling?" asked Kamon doggedly.

"Mamimi Samejima and I were hanging out."

"She's no good," Shigekuni said, wholly to himself, still eating his meal. "She's not good enough for Tasuku."

Kamon continued, "Exactly what have you been doing with your brother's girlfriend while he's been away?"

"We met up by accident."

"Have you done it?"

"I'm still in junior high!" Naota yelped, "What are you thinking?"

"I knew you'd say that! When I was your age, I used the same excuses. You're just like me. You've done it, haven't you? Yes, I'm sure you must have."

"Oh, really?" Haruko's eyes narrowed. "You're popular."

"I'm nothing to overlook," chimed in Shigekuni. "I'm single."

"What are you saying, Father? Me—I'm single, plus, I'm a fine man." Kamon's face stiffened. "Anyway, Haruko, you already know Naota?"

"More than that," Haruko said. "Takkun and I, we already have *that* kind of relationship."

"You mean…?"

"Yes, mouth to mouth."

"Mouth to mouth… as in CPR?"

"Shut up about it!" shouted Naota.

Kamon suddenly stood up, grabbed his son's shoulders, and pushed him against the wall.

"Is that true, Naota? I thought you were a complete washout, but…"

"I have no idea what you're talking about!"

Naota needed a break from this madness. Obviously, Kamon was worked up—not because he was truly angry, but because he was excited to have a female in the house. And Naota wasn't in the mood to be any part of it.

"So, you've already… with Haruko…"

"No!"

"I bet you thought you'd do it again tonight, eh? Oh, I can see those impure thoughts behind your seeming indifference."

"I'm not hiding anything."

"Yes, you are."

"I'm not hiding anything!"

"Under that bandage," Haruko interjected, "he might be hiding something there."

What's going on?

After hastily finishing his nightmarish dinner, Naota climbed into the bathtub.

Is that Haruko Haruhara girl really going to live in our house from now on? I have to do something!

However, Kamon and Shigekuni already had fallen for her, and there wasn't much Naota could do on his own. Of course, there wasn't any way his father and grandfather could have known Haruko was the infamous light-speed Vespa girl.

If he told them, he didn't think it would change their minds, though. Apparently, after living in an all-male household for so long, even a crazy girl like Haruko seemed like a beautiful flower.

However, he had to do *something*. That girl was a dangerous maniac.

Seated in the bathtub, Naota gently touched the bandage on his forehead. He wasn't sure whether being near her would make the horn better or worse.

Through the window, he heard laughter. It seemed that Haruko, Kamon, and Shigekuni were having a drink in the living room.

They're in a good mood.

After his bath, when Naota went upstairs, he noticed a voice coming from his bedroom. It sounded like Haruko: "On the surface,

they make medical machines, but I haven't snuck in yet."

A cell phone?

It seemed that arrogant girl had made an uncharacteristic mistake. From her serious tone, it appeared she was making excuses to someone. She sounded like a child who was being scolded for tardiness.

Just then, Naota was further surprised to hear a man tut-tutting in response.

This wasn't a cell phone call! She was talking to another person in Naota's room. There was another stranger in his house! That aside, though, the weird girl had gone into his room without asking his permission. It was a very serious matter.

This wasn't the kind of moment to stand around listening, so Naota quickly opened the door to his room. Inside, contrary to his expectations, Haruko sat upright on the floor, completely alone. There was no one else present.

The only other being was Miyu Miyu, who sat outside on the veranda, visible through the open window. The cat gave a little cry and jumped onto the roof.

"Who were you talking to?"

"Just myself," said Haruko, laughing.

"You shouldn't go into other people's rooms without asking."

"So, there are a lot of things a teenage boy needs to hide, huh?" Looking up at the top bunk, she reasoned, "Takkun uses the bottom bunk, so I'll take the top."

"You must be kidding."

She wasn't kidding. She truly was planning to sleep in the same room with Naota tonight.

"Come on," he said, "what are you really?"

"I'm a wandering helper."

"Earlier, you said you were a housekeeper."

"Under the bandage…"

"You're so weird."

"What's under the bandage?"

Pausing, Naota thought, *Wait a second.*

His theory that his horn had resulted either from Haruko hitting him or from the mouth-to-mouth CPR she had given him seemed to be true. As she was already there in the house, it wouldn't hurt at least to ask her what the horn was.

"Tell me, Haruko, what is this?"

"Yes, tell *me,* what is this?"

"It's your fault."

"It's your own head," she replied maddeningly.

"It's because you hit me."

"So, take it off and show me."

"Don't touch it!"

Haruko approached with a grin, which triggered a sudden, instinctive fear in Naota. He knocked away her hand. *I can't let my guard down. I have to be careful with her.*

He said, "Dad brought you here, so go be with him. Stop bothering me!" Without meaning to, he'd let his tone become harsh.

Haruko fell silent and stared at him with a serious expression, unlike any he'd seen on her face before. Her eyes resembled those of a lover who'd been hurt by an unfaithful man.

"What?" he asked.

"I saw *you* first."

The innocence in her voice took Naota by surprise.

Haruko was trying to explain that the reason she'd come to this house was because *Naota* lived here.

Of course, having a maniacal girl set her sights on him was scary—but still, hearing her innocent tone and seeing her expression… When she looked him with those green eyes and said she was here because of him… for that single instant, Naota felt something for her.

Idiot, what are you thinking?

"Anyway, the top bunk is my brother's, so absolutely no one else can sleep there. That's simply the way it is," Naota said, stretching out on his own bed.

He turned his back to Haruko, giving her an unspoken hint to leave.

Now isn't the time or place for weird feelings.

If this girl, Haruko, didn't know what the horn was, he would have to return to the hospital. Tomorrow, he'd ditch her and then go to get it checked out.

"Where is your brother?" Haruko didn't hesitate to ask, despite the fact that Naota had turned away from her to sleep. "Hey," she said insistently, "where is your brother?"

"You're so annoying! He's in America."

"What's he doing there?"

"Playing baseball."

"Wow, he must be good at it!"

"So what?"

"Well, good night," said Haruko.

Maybe she finally caught the drift, Naota thought, as he sensed Haruko standing up. Naota assumed she was leaving, and he felt relieved. The next moment, however, her actions stupefied him.

Does this girl have no common sense?

"You're sleeping here?" His voice rose automatically as he said a second time, "You're sleeping *here*?"

Of all things, Haruko had slipped into bed next to him.

"There's nowhere else," she said sheepishly.

"Fine, do what you want."

Naota knew there was no point in any further argument, so he attempted to push his way past her in order to sleep in the top bunk. As he tried, Haruko shouted in a loud voice, "That's your brother's bunk!"

Naota was stunned into silence.

"That's your brother's bunk! It's his, so absolutely no one else can sleep there! That's simply the way it is!"

In wordless fury, Naota listened to his own strictures thrown back at him.

Such a childish fight, he thought to himself. *There aren't any real adults in the world.*

His place to sleep stolen from him, Naota went downstairs, clutching his pillow. He found Kamon sitting in the darkened shop.

"Naota?" said his father, adopting the same tone he used when petting the cat.

Seeing his father like this was kind of eerie.

"We need to have a serious talk, Naota."

"About what?"

"It's about Haruko. Are you opposed to her?"

Naota had no idea whether his father was talking about employing her as a housekeeper or having her as a wife. Actually, Naota would have opposed either one, but he knew his opinions wouldn't affect his father's decision.

"Do what you want."

"Naota… Nao, innocent little Nao. Oh, right! Mamimi stopped by earlier today."

"Eh?"

What did Dad say? Did he just say Mamimi *came over?*

Kamon explained, "She came over to ask for the leftover bread."

"Mamimi came here?" Naota said, his voice betraying his emotions.

"Of course, it'll taste fine if she fries it with a little oil. I guess her family isn't so well-off."

Mamimi came here. Mamimi came to my house!

"Where do you think you're going at this hour?"

Kamon's question didn't reach Naota's ears, as he had run out of the house into the night streets.

All thoughts of the horn and Haruko had disappeared.

Chapter 4

Naota ran through the dark streets.

When he opened his eyes, he found himself standing at the place it seemed he usually visited after school: Mabase Bridge.

Mamimi came over!

Mamimi had stopped by his house, knowing his brother wasn't there. It was the first time that had happened. Although all he knew was that she'd attempted to visit, the non-event had propelled Naota to run out, ecstatic.

They'd never made any particular promises to meet each other, but Naota had faith. Mamimi was definitely at Mabase Bridge, waiting —alone—for Naota to arrive.

They were two parallel lines that would have continued forward into eternity… now, though, one of them had shifted direction, if slightly. Naota ran with all his might, spurred on by the hope that their lines would meet now. At times like this, young men glimpse, if dimly, how big the love they seal inside themselves can be.

Mamimi!

His quivering breath disappeared into the darkness of the street.

A line of white smoke ascended into the starry sky. It was Mamimi's cigarette smoke.

She was leaning against the rail, looking down into the dark water. Despite the hour, she still wore her school uniform.

Naota pulled up and began walking toward her. He seemed unable to slow his quick, gasping breath.

Looking sideways at Naota, Mamimi discarded her cigarette into the river.

"I have a lot," she said, indicating the bag of bread crusts at her feet.

She sat down next to the bag and began silently eating one of the crusts. She wore the same expression on her face that he'd seen so many times after school.

"They're not very good," she commented.

"You said you weren't smoking anymore."

Naota had started to regret that he'd run here as fast as he could.

Why did you stop by my house? he wondered. He couldn't ask Mamimi that question, no matter how much he wanted to—not when she had those same after-school eyes.

All the hopes he'd nurtured while hurrying here were nothing but illusions.

"Takkun, you're out of breath."

Now, he silently leaned against the rail and looked down at the black, flowing water.

What did I hope she'd say?

When he thought about it objectively, he realized what he should've known already. He understood why the fickle Mamimi had visited his house out of the blue.

"You want some?"

"No," he said, thinking, *You couldn't have come over simply because you wanted bread crusts.* He couldn't say the words aloud, though.

Mamimi stood up and brushed dirt from her skirt. As usual, she hugged Naota silently from behind. She didn't ask why he had sprinted there. It was very late at night, but everything felt exactly like it did after school.

The night river reflected a ghostly moon.

As Mamimi kept clasping Naota, he resolved, *I can't do this anymore. This can't go on any longer.*

"Have you gotten any letters?" Naota asked.

He felt Mamimi's body stiffen slightly against his back.

"Have you heard anything from him at all?" Naota said, knowing his words were out of pure spite.

He knew Mamimi understood that her relationship with Tasuku was over. Although she recognized this truth, she was too scared to admit it to herself. Tasuku hadn't thought of Mamimi as his lover in the first place; that was why he'd found it so easy to let Naota know he had a steady girlfriend in America.

It was a cruel thing to say, but Naota had to ask, "How much do you like my brother?"

Mamimi held her breath. The moment seemed to last forever; he never felt her exhalation.

"Like watermelon," Mamimi replied, after the silence passed. "Or like a panda with a mean face, or like a store that carries sandals just my size, or like when you wake up and realize it's Sunday… Well, I like him more than old bread crusts, anyway."

"Then, why don't you stop doing this?"

She didn't respond.

"You know, my brother, he…"

Suddenly, Mamimi covered her ears with her hands. It was the first time Naota had seen such anguish. Like a cat clinging to a branch as it washed down a river, Mamimi pushed her hands over her ears, hunching up. Her entire body was begging him not to continue.

Watching her, Naota felt as if his body, too, would burst. *Why not want me instead? I'm here. What's wrong with me?*

Finally, Mamimi, still slumped over, whispered painfully, "I'm going

to overflow."

Eh?

"Really, I'm going to overflow…"

"What?"

Abruptly, Mamimi screamed, and Naota panicked.

Denial of this magnitude has to be hysteria, doesn't it?

As he stared in horror, Mamimi closed her mouth, lost consciousness, and collapsed on the ground, as though the lights had been turned off inside her.

"Mamimi!"

Frightened, Naota propped up her body, but—

"Ow!"

In that instant, Naota's head was consumed by a violent, burning pain. He went rigid, as if he'd received an electric shock. His forehead started to ache.

At that exact moment, inside the large MM factory that sat on the small hill overlooking Mabase, something started to happen. Suddenly, inside the factory—which, since its inauguration, always ended the work day and turned off the lights at five o'clock—every light switched on. The building, which looked like a giant iron, lit up, striking a dignified position against the night sky. To nearby residents' surprise, sirens started blaring, and searchlights spanned across the factory's surroundings.

The building suddenly seemed less like a factory and more like a prison from which a convict had escaped.

And Haruko Haruhara, who had been lying down in Naota's room, suddenly sat bolt upright.

"It's here!"

Her green eyes sparkled with a new intensity.

Like a magnet, the bracelet she wore on her left wrist was reacting to some specific kind of energy wave. Haruko jumped from the second-floor window without hesitation, landed gallantly astride her Vespa, and punched the accelerator.

The frightful sound of the speeding scooter ripped through the city.

What Naota had feared before now became his reality. He had stuck on the bandage using extra-strength instant adhesive, but the bandage suddenly had torn. The horn had come bursting out.

Now, both of Naota's legs were several inches off the ground; he was floating in midair. The horn had begun to emit some sort of anti-gravity power and was levitating Naota's body.

It was a flying horn.

Naota clawed desperately at the horn protruding from his own forehead, terrified now that his feet were no longer on the ground. He shook in horror.

It's gotten bigger!

The horn was longer and fatter than before. Indeed, it was still growing. Could it be "overflowing," too?

Keeeeeeen.

He heard a loud ringing echo through his ears, and his eardrums threatened to burst. Strangely, he felt no pain in the rest of his body. The actual horn itself was numb to the touch, like some bizarre, paralyzed limb. As if in a dream, he felt only the horrid sensation of a foreign object protruding from him.

He stared at the dark blue horn extending from his forehead, pointing straight toward the sky. There was nothing he could do but leave his body to its fate.

The "horn" wasn't a horn at all. Naota's stomach had turned over, as he helplessly watched the ghastly horns growth. The dark blue horn that he remembered from yesterday revealed itself to be a finger. Of all things, it was an index finger.

And slowly following that index finger was an enormous hand, complete from little finger to thumb. The wrist and arm appeared in turn. As though trying to grasp the stars in the night sky, a massive hand reached up from Naota's forehead.

It was a dark blue, metallic, mechanical arm—something exquisite and robotic. In fact, it was—unmistakably—a robot arm.

A robot was springing from his head. Like a moth that bursts through its original cocoon when it leaves its larval stage, a robot was climbing out of Naota's head.

This is what was inside my head?

He agonized. The truth was weirder than Naota had imagined.

Only half the body had emerged, but that portion alone was a giant metal monster, the size of which far surpassed Naota's entire body mass. Naota still was floating slightly above the ground—but if a proportionately sized robot succumbed to gravity and fell downward, Naota definitely would be crushed to death.

"Ah!" As the ringing in his ears reached its crescendo, the robot leapt free from Naota's head. Like the cork of a champagne bottle, the robot briefly arced upward into the black sky before its iron frame landed dexterously on the bridges metal railings. A heavy clanging resounded throughout the area.

The robot's entire body was now completely visible. It had a humanoid shape, with two arms and two legs. The body towered six feet high, and its head resembled a television set.

Although the robot finally had separated itself from Naota, the

ordeal wasn't over yet. Right away, another robotic arm had reached out from Naota's head and latched itself onto the first robot's side.

Sparks flew from the humanoid robot's body.

The first robot wielded its empty hand like a sword to chop at the new robot's arm. Using incredibly destructive power, the android severed the second robot's forearm.

With the momentum of a stretched-out rubber band that's cut suddenly, the main part of what was now a severed robotic arm retreated back into Naota's head. It apparently had returned to "the other side." Simultaneously, the oppressive ringing in Naota's ears stopped.

Finally free, Naota's body tumbled to the ground. Once he caught his breath, he called out "Mamimi!" Naota ran over to the fallen girl.

She'd lost consciousness. Given the circumstances, that was good.

The android looked as if it was trying to escape an enemy.

Its adversary still was moving. The freshly severed arm pushed itself along, using its five fingers like tentacles. Moving around on its fingers, the arm looked like it was imitating an octopus or a squid. With unbelievable speed, it distanced itself from the humanoid robot. The arm seemed to be preparing for a fight.

This creepy robotic life form still was ambulatory. And standing up straight, the arm measured about the same height as Naota.

Naota instantly saw that the humanoid robot was the prey, and the arm was the predator.

The android attempted to run away—but a few seconds later, it was tripped. The unseen attack must have been forceful, because the robot didn't get up to keep moving away. Persistently, the arm kept pursuing, thwarting all the android's escape attempts.

In medicine, a machine called an ESWL (Lithotriptor) provides noninvasive treatments for kidney stones by focusing high-intensity acoustic pulses that break up the stones. Such pulses seemed to be the arm's weapon, and it aimed that weapon at the areas where the android moved.

The bodies of both robots bore the same mark: It was the logo of

MM, the medical machinery maker.

In one of the rooms at the MM Mabase factory, a siren still blared and a host computer continued transmitting "message received" signals.

Undeterred for a single second, battle reports flashed onscreen, one after another:

> *«MMR Class [K].001 ATOMSK flees into Mabase. 22:14*
>
> *MMR Class [J] DH pursues and attempts to capture or damage fail. 22:16*
>
> *Manipulator breaks off from DH and currently operates alone. Original 82% returns with the closing of FLCL; remaining 18% engages in battle in Mabase. 22:16.*
>
> *Returning 82% issued code RH; remaining 18% issued code LH. 22:16.*
>
> *LH uses Shockwave weapon. Engages in battle. 22:16.*
>
> *Good luck to LH in executing battle strategy.»*

LH, the arm, scuttled around, targeting the android's position.

Still holding Mamimi, Naota couldn't move. The area had turned into a battlefield.

The arm pointed a thin, threadlike laser toward Naota.

Shit!

Both combatants had ignored Naota and Mamimi up until then—but the arm must have noticed the two bystanders and was

calculating how to deal with them now.

What should I do? Naota wondered.

It seemed crazy, but Naota could think of no other option but to jump into the river with Mamimi.

Right then, the humanoid robot—which had fled its pursuer until now—suddenly turned and attacked the arm. It attempted to destroy the enemy entirely with a single blow. As before, when it had fought the main portion of the arm, the force unleashed by the android was powerful.

However, the humanoid robot moved carelessly close to the arm.

Bright white sparks ran down the android's body, and the robot stopped as suddenly as if it had been deactivated. This time, it appeared to have absorbed a fatal hit. The smell of scorching metal was everywhere.

The arm laughed with an electrical noise.

In a grotesque, wriggling motion, the arm once again grabbed hold of the humanoid robot, ready to finish it off. It tried to crush the android with its powerful grip, a weapon in its own right. Creaks like screams came from the strangled robot, which tottered forward one step, then two.

Suddenly, the android's appearance changed. The navy blue body transformed instantly into a deep crimson color.

As though its demise had been merely a feint, the android snatched the arm, wrenched it away from its body, and smashed it into the pavement. It was a complete turnaround. Not giving the arm the slightest opportunity, the humanoid robot crushed the center of its opponent's palm beneath its metal foot—all within the space of a moment.

Sparks and an explosion followed.

Naota shielded Mamimi from the blast and the heat.

«[K] reacts to ATOMSK. Reason unknown. 22:19

LH movement stopped. Eliminated. 22:19

Awaiting further communication. 22:19»

The humanoid robot pulled apart the scrapped arm's defenses, and then it yanked out the machine component innards, ensuring the arm's utter destruction.

Could it be, Naota thought*, it saved us?*

It certainly felt like the arm had begun to come after Mamimi and Naota—and that was when the android suddenly had started to fight, as if it had been worried about them.

What is it?

The robot that had come out of Naota's head silently continued to dismantle the arm.

This robot came out of my head!

This is the robot that came out of my head!

Then, a roaring noise approached, and Naota recognized the terrible sound of a scooter's engine.

"Haruko?"

As he'd anticipated, the approaching headlights were those of a Vespa.

Guitar in hand, Haruko leapt off the bike and ran toward the humanoid robot. En route, she started up a hand-operated generator mounted on the back of her guitar.

As she lifted it, the guitar emitted bright energy and light. Of course, Naota had no idea it was actually a light-space-modifying weapon in the shape of a guitar.

"Uuuuaaaagggh!" With the beautiful stance of a professional

baseball player, Haruko heaved the guitar toward the robot's head. Her aim was perfect.

It was the first time Naota had seen anyone with such an amazing swing—other than his brother. To the uninvolved viewer, her gorgeous attack was like part of a flawless dance.

Apparently, the android hadn't expected this new, fleshy opponent to appear, and it reacted a moment too late. Its TV-monitor head took a direct hit. Part of the monitor split apart, coughing out a small stream of smoke. For a few seconds yet, some muddy operating sounds were audible; then, the robot plopped down, as if it had lost the ability to move.

"Eh?" Haruko said, scanning the quiet surroundings, "Where is it?"

"What?" asked Naota, wondering why Haruko had attacked the robot.

Looking down at the bracelet on her left hand, Haruko seemed dissatisfied. She glanced around again. She was looking for something or someone.

"Why isn't it here?"

"What are you looking for?"

The outrageous girl looked Naota in the eye and moaned, telling him he was utterly useless.

Okay. Now, he understood. It was an amazing experience: Two robots coming out of his head, having a fierce battle, and so on. He realized that's not something every sixth grader got to see. A few days after all that happened, though, he still retained his belief that there wasn't anything amazing in this world. Who was the Japanese philosopher who had said perception and experience were different things? Back then, no matter what happened in front of him, it amounted to no more than something he happened to see. Don't hate him for that. Don't hate who he was back then. After all, he was but a child.

When Naota went to school the next day, he no longer wore a bandage across his forehead. The horn was absent for the time being, as well.

There is nothing amazing in this world. Everything is ordinary.

The robot that had been a horn now was kneading dough at the Shigekuni Bakery. The area of its head where Haruko had hit it still looked a little strange, but the robot could move again.

Commenting vaguely that they had picked up something useful, Kamon had put the robot to work.

"See you later," Naota had called to the robot on his way out.

Along Naota's route to school, Mamimi jumped out at him. She was sipping a canned beverage.

She had fainted the night before, so she didn't have a single memory of what had happened, and Naota didn't feel like explaining everything to her.

"Morning!" Mamimi greeted.

"Hey," answered Naota.

Mamimi offered him the canned drink in her hand. It was lemonade.

"I don't like sour things," said Naota, but then he immediately took the can and gulped down its remaining contents.

The season most special to Naota had just begun.

Chapter 1

All the sorrows in the world collected within one body.

Although it was supposed to be his special season, Naota felt more depressed than ever.

Outside, students rode bicycles. Elderly couples savored their walks together. Two crows perched in a ginkgo tree. The cyclists, the elderly couples, the crows in the ginkgo tree—everyone seemed to be enjoying freedom. That was all outside the window, though.

It felt like, of the whole wide world, only the students in this class remained unjustly locked up. The freedom to walk between tree-lined avenues under the autumn sky was something they wouldn't be able to obtain until after their hundred-year prison sentences had been served.

Afternoon classes, cleaning time, and all the rest had ended. The other classes were leaving school now—all except Naota's. Naota's class still couldn't go home because it was a debate day.

Naota's teacher, Miss Miyaji, was a young, enthusiastic, vitamin-filled type of person. Despite being an adult, she sometimes acted like a spoiled little princess—the kind who would have hundreds of stuffed toys lined up in her room, each with a name she'd given it.

At Miss Miyaji's suggestion, the class had to stay after school twice a week for a useless debate. Naota's first thought about this idea had been: *You have to be kidding.*

Naota didn't have much confidence in Miss Miyaji.

One of Naota's female classmates recently had been placed in charge, and she was habitually forgetful. Every time the girl forgot something, Miss Miyaji scolded her in front of the whole class. The teacher wasn't particularly harsh, but the girl wasn't very thick-skinned, so she'd start crying, and then it would be ages before she'd calm down. Whenever this happened, Miss Miyaji would stand

next to the girl and then, clapping her hands together, would start singing, "The girl who shed crocodile tears was a geisha girl!"

In the meantime, there was nothing the rest of the class could do but stand by and watch the bizarre performance. Miss Miyaji claimed that her own grandmother had sung her that song during her childhood whenever she'd cried crocodile tears. Regardless, Naota and the rest of his class didn't think their classmate was shedding fake tears.

There was something messed up with this spoiled princess of a teacher. She was pretty enthusiastic, but you couldn't place your faith in her. If you followed her teachings too closely, she probably would lead you very much astray.

As Miss Miyaji had recommended, today's debate topic was fires.

In Mabase, there had been several fires recently, and it looked as if they'd been caused by arson. The incidents had made the newspapers, too.

Last night, a private residence not too far from the junior high had been burned halfway down. The school couldn't ignore this, so it issued a cautionary warning: "Recently, there have been quite a few fires due to arson. Everyone, please keep an eye out for any suspicious people." And that was all. At least, that was all the other classes had been told, anyway.

However, Miss Miyaji had begun an endless story about a memory she had from her school days, when a gas station had exploded, its roof blowing off.

Please, shut up, Naota thought fervently.

Naota, too, remembered a fire. Although it had happened when he had been in kindergarten, he recalled the incident vividly: It had been a night in early spring.

Mabase Elementary School used to be a wooden building alongside the riverbank, but the old building had burned down. Led by his brother, Tasuku, the young Naota had left his house to watch the

fire.

Crackle, crackle, crackle.

The scene was strangely beautiful. The school garden's cherry trees were in full bloom, and the falling blossoms were lit up by the burning building.

Naota had been very young at the time; thinking about it, Tasuku must have been in elementary school himself. Whenever Naota remembered that time, Tasuku seemed like a grown-up to him, though, even then. For various reasons, his brother always had been mature.

Naota couldn't forget the fire; it was near that burning school where he had first met Mamimi.

Mamimi Samejima…

I have to meet Mamimi today.

That was the real reason this long after-school meeting annoyed Naota.

Since the night the robot had emerged, Naota hadn't returned to Mabase Bridge once. Frankly, his need to meet with Mamimi was much stronger than before. The single thing on his mind, at home or at school, was Mamimi. At the same time, though, his heart still was conflicted. He got the feeling he shouldn't see her for a while. More than that, he was frightened of being with her again.

His heart wavered with the uncertainty of how he should act the next time he saw her. That strange night, he had planned to end their fuzzy relationship, but he hadn't found the chance to make his resolution a reality.

Today, he wanted to see Mamimi so much that he couldn't stand it —just a glimpse of her would be enough.

He hadn't been back to Mabase Bridge, but maybe she had gone there today, all alone. Maybe she was waiting for Naota to meet her there. No, she definitely was waiting, and he was going to see her.

He had to go.

I need to see her!

Thus, Naota was infuriated by having to stay behind for this endless debate.

Please, finish already and let us go home. If I don't hurry, then Mamimi might leave.

"So, that was the terrible fire I'd witnessed. Next time, I'm going to show all of you the newspaper reports."

Finally, the words signaling the end of his prison term reached his ears. The second his teacher said, "Everyone, please be careful going home," Naota already had jumped up, bag in hand.

Naota dashed out of the classroom at full speed, but he was hailed by Gaku and Masashi at their lockers.

"What's up, Naota? Why the hurry?" they asked. "You busy?"

He could have said "yes" and gone straight home; without thinking, a lie came out: "No, not really."

He wanted to hide the true reason that he needed to leave so quickly from his classmates. Therefore, he said the exact opposite of what he really wanted to say. He regretted his response the second he'd said it.

Gaku and Masashi were good friends of Naota. They all lived close to one another, so they often went home from school together.

Recently, that had become something of a concern for Naota, who wanted his classmates to know as little as possible about the time he'd been spending under the bridge with a high schooler. He didn't want to imagine the kinds of rumors that would spread if people knew a twelve-year-old boy was doing such things. His actions would be a capital offense to his friends, like giving up the secrets from a shared diary. Naturally, Naota didn't want to ruin his

friendships over gossip, so he had taken great care to hide his meetings with Mamimi from his classmates.

Gaku and Masashi already had seen him with Mamimi several times now. He had explained to them she was just a girl he knew somewhat—but if they continued to see him with her time and again, then they probably would figure out that he had an unusual relationship.

"We're going to go look at the burned-down house," Gaku said, referring to the remains from last night's fire.

"You'll come, right, Naota?" Masashi assumed.

"Of course," Naota heard himself answer.

I don't want to go look at that kind of thing.

"Where are you going?"

Startled, he turned around to face the person who'd spoken behind him. It was Ninamori. She must have been standing there, listening to them.

"Don't loiter. Go straight home."

"Busybody class president," Masashi said.

Naota agreed Ninamori was a busybody, but in his heart, he pleaded that Gaku and Masashi would obey her for just this one day. Of course, praying didn't change anything.

Eventually, all four of them left the school gates together.

Disgruntled, Masashi asked why Ninamori was following them. Gaku then teased that there had to be a reason why the class president would want to be with them. A little annoyed, Ninamori grumbled about what he meant by that. Otherwise, though, it was quite a happy group.

Suddenly, Naota was given a start when he'd heard the familiar sound of a portable game.

No way! Seriously give me a break.

When he looked up in surprise, Mamimi stood by the front gates. Still in her school uniform, she was sitting on the asphalt, playing her handheld game.

This is the worst, Naota thought, sighing deeply. *Mamimi's here.*

He had wanted to see her so much, when they could be alone—not in front of other people, and *certainly* not in front of his classmates. How dare she inconsiderately come to his school like this? Now, Naota felt rage.

"Hey, Takkun."

"What are you doing here—at my school?"

Just for once, think of other people, he wanted to say.

Naota's cold words were lost in the wind somehow, and Mamimi looked at him with her usual grin. She almost seemed to enjoy Naota's concern about what other people would think.

Ninamori, meanwhile, eyed Mamimi with suspicion. Her thoughts were written all over her face: "Who's that girl acting all familiar with Naota? Dyed hair, red lips, sitting in the street, playing a portable game although she's already in high school—totally pathetic!"

"Who's that?" she asked.

"That's his wife," answered Gaku.

"Yeah, he likes his women older," Masashi added.

Naota heard the entire exchange. Embarrassed, he cursed himself for neglecting the evidence that his friends had been suspicious the entire time, after all.

"Are they going out?"

Gaku and Masashi snickered meaningfully. Knowing Ninamori had

been paying attention to Naota, they were being pretty spiteful.

Naota tried to think of an excuse to get far away.

"Takkun, that looks cool," Mamimi said innocently. "It really suits you."

Is that true?

She was talking about the bandana wrapped around Naota's head. As soon as she mentioned it, Naota tried to hide the bandana with his hands. He'd been wearing it the whole day.

He needed it now. Because a second horn had emerged.

It had happened the previous night.

Naota had woken up suddenly in the middle of the night, feeling like he couldn't move his arms or legs. It was as though he'd been tied up.

Vague fear immediately changed to very real alarm. He smelled some kind of drug and felt groggy. *Is this the work of that person I heard about in school?* he thought when he felt paralyzed. *The one who ties up people?*

Looking around, he saw Haruko in the dimness. She'd been sleeping in the top bunk, so it wasn't unusual for her to be in his room. However, she looked different than usual. For some reason, she was dressed all in white and was peering down at the motionless Naota.

"What are you doing?" Naota managed to get out.

"Playing doctor," Haruko laughed.

Then, she turned and spoke to someone else who was behind her, "What? The response is strengthening… No, I wanted to ask: Why is it happening here? Looking at the X-rays, you can see this kid's brain is totally empty…"

He thought he heard a man's voice coming from behind her, but he couldn't be sure.

My brain is empty?

Haruko touched Naota's skull. Feeling Haruko's cold hands, he realized for the first time that he was naked. With fear and embarrassment, he tried to yell at her to stop; he couldn't control his mouth, though, and eventually lost consciousness again.

It hadn't been a bad dream. When he regained awareness, a horn protruded from his forehead once again. And this time, there were horns at both the front and back of his skull. Two horns! It looked like a sharp metal object had pierced his head.

"Since you arrived," he told Haruko, "everything in my life has been awful."

"That's because your brain is empty," Haruko replied. "I had nothing to do with those horns."

Whose fault is it, then?

Unnerved, Naota glanced sideways at Haruko, who offered him the bandana.

The longer Haruko stayed with him, the worse things became. Once again, Naota had a horn situation. Life, indeed, had hit rock bottom.

In the end, Naota had left Gaku, Masashi, Ninamori, and Mamimi at the school gates, going home alone.

He had seen Mamimi today, as he'd been hoping to; but once again, the reality had made him feel awful.

Why do all these terrible things keep happening?

When he arrived home, yet another distressing thing occurred: He saw the robot that had come out of his head the other day, and it was outside again!

Kamon had been putting the robot to hard work at the shop. Now, the android was carrying in some kind of printed materials from the car. From the look of things, it appeared Kamon had not abandoned his hopes of becoming a famous author, and he had written some kind of fan fiction. Of course, Naota, who had no interest in such materials, hadn't read it.

"The neighbors have eyes, you know!" Naota objected.

His father was unabashed about using the robot outdoors in the middle of the day, despite Naota's instructions that he not let it out where other people could see.

"Just because you found it, that means you can hog it?" Kamon seemed completely unconcerned. "Isn't that a little selfish?"

"It's weird. Who else owns a robot?"

"Why shouldn't we have one? A house with a robot—think of the significance of such impossible science or technology. Here, we have a humanoid robot combined with a human household. Doesn't it speak to the loss of father figures and the supplementation of lacking family relationships? What's your take on the symbolism and perception of this mechanical robot mixed into a normal family household?"

Naota sighed, not saying a word. His father's one published book was about a robotic machine: *The Mysteries and Meanings of Evangelion*. Unsold copies still lined the Nandaba household's bookshelves.

"Wasn't he walking around on his own last night, too? That dumb robot!" Naota growled.

"He wanted a breath of fresh air. Isn't that right, TV-boy?"

Because of its monitor-like head, Kamon had started calling the robot "TV-boy."

"You've heard about all the fires around here recently, haven't you?" Naota asked. "If it wanders around suspiciously, people are going to start thinking it's the one starting the fires."

As soon as Naota had finished the sentence, he had a sudden thought: *This isn't a fire-spewing robot, is it?*

The fires had begun around the time the robot had emerged from Naota's head. And now, it was walking around on its own in the middle of the night. There were a lot of worrisome things about its behavior.

No, wait a second, Naota thought. He'd realized it was also true that the fires had started after Haruko arrived. The robot was odd, but all things considered, that coarse, maniacal woman was far, far more suspicious.

He couldn't say it was beyond her. No, in truth, it wasn't hard to believe it had been her. There was simply too much evidence not to suspect that she might be the fire starter.

Damn…

She had brought more bad luck with her than he could have imagined. Because of Haruko, Naota's life was at the lowest point ever.

The shop's phone rang.

When Naota picked up the receiver, he heard the insolent girl say, "Hey, Takkun. It's me, Haruko. I don't suppose you could come and get me? They've kind of caught me…"

Contrary to Naota's expectations, it wasn't the police who had apprehended her. The place where she was being held was a guard station in the MM factory compound.

She had instructed him to bring one of the bike parts from her room (that is to say, Naota's room) when he came.

I can't believe this. She's nothing but trouble.

He thought about ignoring her, but then he thought back to what Haruko had said to him when she'd given him the bandana:

"Hey, it really suits you. You look good."

I guess I have to go. Damn!

He walked twenty minutes and arrived at the MM building, which resembled a clothes iron. As ordered, Naota went to a small office

near the entrance gate. Inside, he saw the Vespa and Haruko crouching over it, fiddling with a part that looked like it had been damaged in an accident.

Opening the door, he addressed a middle-aged man who was dressed in a guard's uniform and sitting on a chair, "Excuse me, I received a phone call earlier."

"Hey, this kid is your guarantor?" the guard asked skeptically, looking Naota up and down.

"Did you bring it?" Haruko asked nonchalantly.

When Naota proffered the bike part, Haruko took the part and inserted it into the Vespa without so much as a "thank you."

"Is this girl completely brainless?" the guard asked. "She's acts so suspicious. Anyway, it hasn't been safe around here lately. I heard last night's fire on Second Street was arson."

Naota felt uneasy inside. "Attempted arson?"

"Yeah. That's why I called the police. She hit the fence with that bike. She's a menace."

Yeah, I know.

After Naota's name and address were taken down on a thin notepad, the guard allowed him to take her home.

"The fence wasn't permanently damaged, so it's okay this once; next time I see her, I'm calling the cops right away."

This is so depressing.

"You're a grown-up," said Naota. "What do you think you were doing?"

"He probably wondered why I had a junior high schooler as my guarantor."

"You have absolutely no common sense."

"You came anyway." Haruko beamed at Naota, her expression unexpectedly innocent. "You came all this way, so I'm going to thank you."

"What kind of thank you?"

"Something more fun than CPR." Haruko gave a meaningful smile.

Hey, don't make me more depressed than I already am.

As they passed through a cluster of trees, they took in the view of the wide ocean. They saw the sky sparkling with sunlight and the fresh blue of the sea.

Haruko and Naota were riding the Vespa along a coastal road. Taking the full brunt of the wind, Naota sat in front of Haruko, who was driving.

"How's the sea?" Haruko asked, sounding satisfied.

"This isn't the season for sightseeing," Naota replied, but the sound of the engine and the wind drowned out his voice, and his words didn't reach Haruko's ears.

She drove at a terrifying speed, zigzagging across the road. As carefree as the expansive sky and the wide sea, she ignored all the rules, wavering left and right at whim.

"Careful!" Naota yelled at her.

Haruko, who must have heard him, twisted the accelerator instead, shouting, "Rider's high!"

"Seriously, you're freaking me out! This is dangerous, and I'm not wearing a helmet!"

However, Naota didn't look entirely unhappy as the wind rushed over his face. After all, this was the first time Naota had ridden on a motorbike. And it was the first time in his life he'd felt the wind like this.

"You have no brain, so what are you worried about?" Haruko laughed.

Then, the Vespa sped up all the more.

The cool autumn air blew straight over him. The stimulating breeze whisked past, exhilarating him.

This feels amazing!

Maybe he enjoyed the feel of the wind rushing past because his head really was empty, exactly like Haruko had said.

Chapter 2

Naota walked down the incline, careful not to slip on the rain-soaked ground.

Mamimi had taken shelter from the rain beneath the bridge.

She sat directly on the concrete, holding a stray cat on her lap. Playing a handheld game, she splashed her legs around in the shallows, although the river wasn't really shallow anymore. Because of the rain, the river had swelled.

It had been raining since that morning. At daybreak, the sky had been gray and cloudy; by afternoon, a heavy downpour had begun.

After walking through the annoying rain, Naota had arrived home from school just in time to get a call from Mamimi.

"I'm at the bridge," she'd said. "My shoes got washed away in the river, so could you come and meet me here?"

Naota had thought to himself that he'd been getting a lot of calls asking him to do things lately. First, it had been Haruko's bike parts; now, it was Mamimi's sandals. However, while he told himself he wasn't going to become anybody's slave, he proceeded to put some sandals in a bag and set out, an umbrella in hand.

Since "that" night, Naota and Mamimi's relationship had taken a strange turn. Yesterday, she had waited for him in front of the school; today, she had called him. It was the first time she'd done either of these things since he'd met her. A little while ago, if Naota had received a phone call from Mamimi, he would have jumped up and run out of the house immediately, heedless of snow, a typhoon, or anything else.

Ducking out of the rain and under the shelter of the bridge, Naota closed his umbrella, removing the sandals from his bag and offering them to her.

Mamimi looked up and grinned at him, showing her teeth as she had yesterday.

"You're in high school already," he said, "so what do you think you're doing?"

"I was playing with Takkun, and I lost my shoes in the water."

"With who?"

She repeated, "With Takkun," and continued to stroke the cat sitting on her knees.

"That's Takkun, too?"

The cat was Takkun; Naota was Takkun; apparently, any substitute pet was Takkun. Thinking about his unhappy situation, Naota sighed.

This fickle high school girl, she really doesn't care about how I feel at all.

"This Takkun is hungry," Mamimi said. "Do you have anything? Cats don't eat gum, do they?"

"Did you find it?"

"I'm like a god," Mamimi smiled, self-satisfied. "I'm a protector of the weak, like Cantido, Lord of the Black Flame."

The God of the Black Flame, Cantido, was a character in the handheld game Fire Starter. Mamimi had been playing it for more than a year now. "I'm so addicted," she'd say with an innocent expression; she would play it again and again without getting bored.

Suddenly, Naota realized what was missing and asked, "Don't you have an umbrella?"

"It's all right. It'll stop soon."

"It'll stop? Look at it."

"I never carry an umbrella."

"Then, what do you do when it rains?"

"I don't mind getting a little wet."

Naota was getting annoyed again. *She doesn't mind getting a little wet? In this downpour, she'll get soaked! She should have said she didn't have an umbrella when she called.*

"Let's play some," Mamimi said, not noticing Naota's concealed rage.

By "play," she meant their kind of fooling around. Naota liked the smell of her, her softness, and her mischief. Today, though, Naota felt like staying away from carefree girls who didn't think of other people's feelings.

"I'm busy," he said coldly. Opening his umbrella, he walked away.

"Takkun," she whispered, touching the kitten's nose.

After about an hour, the rain stopped.

The clouds began to disperse, revealing glimpses of a blue sky.

Mamimi put on the sandals that Naota had brought her; then, she stood up, still holding the cat. Whimsically, she walked along the riverbank, wearing the oversized sandals and looking at the dragonflies that had come out after the rain had stopped.

And then…

She saw something that took her breath away.

Next to the river, the tall grass grew thick. In that tall grass, an odd-shaped figure stood, the likes of which she hadn't seen before. It was big, had a dark blue body, and looked like some kind of idol. It wasn't a statue, though; it was alive.

It took three giant steps toward the riverbank, gazing at its

surroundings.

"God?" Instinctively holding her breath, Mamimi hid in the grass and watched the figure with excitement.

The odd-shaped figure was none other than the robot that had come out of Naota's head. It must have seized an opportunity when Kamon wasn't looking to leave the shop. What it was doing in this forsaken place was a mystery.

After loitering on the bank for a while, the robot climbed up the concrete shore and began walking off somewhere.

Mamimi, heart pounding in her chest, followed after it.

The place the robot was headed appeared to be the burned-down wooden school building by the side of the river. The grass grew high over the ruins. It was the old Mabase Elementary School. The building still hadn't been demolished, despite all these years, and the ruins were covered in ashes, just as they'd been that night. On the walls, the clocks had stopped at the exact time the fire had erupted.

The robot stood in the center of the building. Suddenly, it turned to face Mamimi. Its television-monitor head stared at her.

Mamimi was taken aback. Had she been chosen deliberately? Yes, she must have been. The girl sensed or imagined some kind of mystical spirit, hidden by that robot's expressionless face.

Among the thin clouds, which had stopped producing rain at that moment, a single shaft of sunlight shone down like a spotlight, illuminating the robot. Cleansed by the rain, the robot sparkled in the light, looking like some sacred object—or, at least, that's how it looked to Mamimi, anyway.

"Oh!" Mamimi exclaimed, surprised.

The heavy metallic body began to float into the air. As it continued to gaze down at Mamimi, the robot disappeared through a parting

in the clouds. When Mamimi looked up at the sky, which was now full of light, she saw that a giant rainbow had appeared.

Mamimi felt inspired by the events she had witnessed. In her mind, there was no doubt: She must have seen a miracle.

"You are a god. You really are."

The rainbow cut a clean, brilliant arc across the autumn sky.

In ecstasy, Mamimi stayed for a while, looking up at the place where her god had vanished.

There had been a considerable amount of gossip about the broken-down robot working at the Shigekuni Bakery, which was unsurprising, given how much it had stood out. Neighbors had talked about how it would linger in the convenience store, reading perverted magazines for three hours at a time. They spoke about how it wandered around, checking the vending machines, searching for forgotten change. They gossiped about how it would go to the barbershop, sitting and reading comics in the waiting area before returning home.

Thus, Mamimi rather quickly was able to find out where the robot lived. Although she heard the rumors decrying it as perverted, nothing could shake the firm conviction that Mamimi had derived from her vision. Already, she was wholeheartedly devoted to the robot, for better or worse.

Nowadays, she followed the robot around, her camera in hand. Increasing her photo collection had become an important part of Mamimi's daily routine. She acted exactly like the paparazzi following a celebrity.

Rumors spread that the robot was hitting on girls who hung around the bakery. Therefore, Mamimi now stopped by Naota's place quite often. Of course, it was merely to see the robot.

That evening, the Nandaba family dinner had ended normally. Kamon was cleaning up. Having learned the robot wasn't home,

Mamimi had lined up her photos on the porch, showing them to Naota. She elaborated on the ones she particularly liked. Perhaps she thought everyone liked the robot as much as she did. The way she spoke about the robot's greatness made her resemble a fan who wanted everyone else to share her obsession.

Naota didn't know what this new god Mamimi followed was doing there; he was concerned about the robot's actions, though, so he looked through the photos. After all, the robot had come out of his head. Looking at the pictures, he saw the robot had been wandering aimlessly around town. Wearing one of Kamon's old jumpers, it had visited backstreets, the riverside, shopping areas, the library, the school, the kindergarten, City Hall, and the bus stop—so many places.

What does it think it's doing? Is it thinking at all?

In any case, to capture all these moments on film, a photographer would have to be dedicated. Recently, Mamimi had been skipping school so she could follow the robot.

Naota didn't really like this development. Maybe it was because she now paid more attention to the robot than to him. *Damn, is this jealousy?*

"You're so lucky, Takkun," Mamimi said. "He doesn't come over to my place."

"You're not allowed pets in your apartment, are you?" Naota asked coldly.

Naota had hidden the fact that the robot had come out of his own head. Keeping the details vague as to how his family had come to have a robot, he explained that it was an automated helper in the Nandaba household.

"Yo, Sameji," greeted Haruko, coming out onto the veranda. She was wearing a sloppy shirt. Haruko had begun calling Mamimi "Sameji," due to her last name, "Samejima."

Mamimi smiled. "Hey, Haru! Good evening!"

Mamimi seemed to admire Haruko an awful lot, something that had surprised Naota. After all, Mamimi had seen Haruko run over him when they'd all met. Despite this, Mamimi respected the young woman, who utterly lacked any common sense. At the end of the day, maybe Mamimi had bad taste. If that were true, then what did

that say about Naota, who liked *her*?

Standing on the porch, Haruko looked up at the night sky and said, "Hey, it came back."

Zigzagging across the sky was an illuminated object. It was the robot.

"It's doing that again?" Naota complained. "Can't it do that somewhere no one will see it?"

"It's so cool," said Mamimi.

Its monitor shining like a headlight, the robot slowly descended straight into the Nandaba household garden.

"Turn off your lights," Naota grumbled.

"Lord Canti!" Mamimi started a thankful prayer to the robot, which was still in the garden.

"Canti?" asked Naota.

"The God of the Black Flame, Lord Cantido."

"Always with that computer game. You can't give it a name yourself?"

"Canti, you're late. You got the stuff?" asked Haruko, deliberately using the name Mamimi had given it. She extended her hand toward the robot.

'Lord Canti' handed over a convenience store shopping bag.

Taking out her evening meal of spicy curry bread and a canned drink, Haruko addressed Lord Canti, "I didn't ask for this! I said the juice with pulp in it! You're so useless!"

"Haru, you shouldn't say that," Mamimi cautioned, unable to let it pass. "He's a god. He's going to turn Endsville to dust."

"Endsville?"

"It's from her game," Naota explained.

'Endsville' was another word she had picked up from Fire Starter. It was the name of the town where the game was set.

Sliding open the paper door, Shigekuni peeked out. As always, he regarded Mamimi with scorn. Shigekuni didn't think much of her. Every time he saw her, he made cruel or sarcastic comments.

In truth, Naota thought Shigekuni's behavior was another expression of jealousy. Shigekuni had been a baseball fan since he was little. Thus, he was very proud of Tasuku, who had inherited his passion for baseball and displayed a natural talent for the game. Because he felt Mamimi somehow would steal Tasuku away from him, he was downright nasty to her.

"Look at my clothes," the old man suddenly boasted. "Tasuku sent them from America."

It could have been an innocent boast, but it was also, likely not coincidentally, an attack on Mamimi, who hadn't heard from Tasuku. That fact alone should have irked Mamimi. However, she ignored the spiteful old man and pointed her camera at the robot, pressing the button to take another photo of Canti.

"Hey, what are you doing, taking pictures of other people's machines? Don't you dare take another picture of our machine. If you do, I'll call the police at once," Naota's grandfather said, pretty much echoing the MM guard. Then, he slammed the screen door shut.

Not fond of Mamimi's newfound obsession, Naota seized this opportunity to speak up, "You know, you really should stop following this robot around. You've been skipping so much school that you're going to get in trouble soon. If you get kicked out of school, there's no way my brother will like you."

Mamimi stood up silently. With a brief, sad expression, she looked at Naota. She started to say something, stopped, and walked out of the garden without a word. She left the photos she had brought over, which were still spread out on the balcony.

"Are you really going to let her go?" Haruko asked. "Why not?" Naota answered. "Nothing bothers her, anyway."

"I see," Haruko said, biting into her spicy curry roll. "Don't buy bread from the convenience store. This is a bakery, you know."

The robot, standing in the garden, watched Mamimi leave.

The next day, on their way home from school, Naota, Gaku, and Masashi went to look at charred ruins again. They'd heard rumors that there had been another fire last night, and that it probably had been arson.

"You can smell the smoke still, huh?" Masashi said.

The remains were surrounded by police tape; several police-related people sifted through the ashes inside.

It had been an abandoned house. Although Naota had seen the site fairly often, now that the ground no longer contained a building, it looked strangely small.

When they moved closer to the scene, one of the workers signaled not to come beyond the tape.

"This isn't merely arson," Gaku said meaningfully. "It's the work of a UFO."

"A UFO?"

"You haven't heard? Recently, a strange object's been sighted in the skies above Mabase. Its picture has been in the paper, too."

Gaku apparently had taken a particular interest in the fire incidents, which was fine—but Naota really wanted to avoid the UFO subject.

"These fire outbreaks," Gaku continued, "they're probably caused by that UFO."

Silently, Naota reflected, *He might be right. The arsonist might not be*

Haruko, but Canti.

The reason Canti—as Mamimi had christened it—was here remained a complete mystery. The weird robot had come out of Naota's head; it would zigzag elusively across the night sky, lighting up its shining head. It certainly wasn't beyond the realm of possibility that the robot was responsible for the fires.

Naota recalled the night it had emerged; there had been another robot Canti had defeated. That one had been pretty violent. It might be only a matter of time before Canti became like that. No one had died in the recent spate of fires, but who knew what might happen? He had to do something.

Carefully, Naota retied the bandana in such a way that his classmates wouldn't notice.

Anyway, why does all the bad stuff happen to me?

When he left the others at the ruins to go home, he took a different route than usual. Although normally he wouldn't cross the bridge, Naota walked toward the riverbank, thinking he might swing by the hangout.

Mamimi might be there—and if they were alone, maybe he wouldn't feel as irritated as he'd been last night. Maybe he could be nicer.

He reconsidered at once.

As if she'd be there! She's in love with Canti at the moment. That stupid high school girl is having a great time, unaware that I'm hiding a horn under this bandana. It would be stupid to put any faith in that carefree girl.

Still she might be at Mabase Bridge right now!

His irritation battled his desire to see Mamimi. If he saw her, he knew he'd get angry right away. He'd get angry, but he still wanted to see her. Unsure how he felt, he looked at the water flowing under

the bridge.

Something brown floated there: Shoes. And two legs.

Looking closer, he saw several high school girls standing at the edge of the river. One girl was surrounded by the others. The girl who was surrounded sat in the flowing water, her skirt billowing in the river. The shoes that had washed away seemed to be hers.

It looked like the others were bullying her.

Come on, grow up, stupid girls.

The bullies left her sitting in the river, mocking her as they walked away. Naota sighed at this intense scene; then, he froze when he caught a better look at the girl slowly standing up in the middle of the river.

It can't be.

She wore the familiar uniform of Mabase Shinda High School. The girl in the river was, without a doubt, Mamimi.

The person being bullied in front of me was Mamimi.

Mamimi silently wrung out her soaked skirt.

Stunned, Naota watched the scene unfold. He thought back to the other day, when Mamimi had called him because her shoes were missing. She had told him the shoes had been washed away while she was playing with Takkun.

When she'd said it, Mamimi had given her typical giggle. Seeing her smile, Naota had thought spitefully how nice it must be for a high school girl with nothing to worry about.

Last night, when Mamimi had walked away, Haruko had asked if it was okay to leave her like that. "Why not?" Naota had answered. "Nothing bothers her, anyway."

The person being bullied in front of me was Mamimi.

Standing in the riverbed, Mamimi looked in his direction. When she spotted Naota standing on the bridge, she stopped. Halting in the midst of wringing her wet skirt, she didn't move.

For a short time, the girl and the boy simply stood there, staring at each other.

Chapter 3

How much time passed?

The two of them perched on top of the bridge. The town soon was covered in a thin darkness, and the cold air chilled their skin.

"My skirt dries quicker this way," Mamimi had said, sitting down on the bridge. Naota couldn't do anything but silently sit next to her.

The headlights of cars passed over them.

This bridge was smaller than Mabase Bridge, where he and Mamimi usually met. There weren't as many cars, and there were fewer streetlamps.

Naota felt like he was in a fleeting dream. If someone had painted this scene, it definitely would be a gloomy picture. Since Mamimi had sat down, she hadn't uttered a single word. Cigarette in her mouth, she silently played her handheld game.

I should say something, Naota thought. He couldn't think of anything to say, though, so the blips from the game continued softly.

She was like a robot that had been programmed to play a game. The cigarette between her lips glowed red, and that was the only way he knew she still was breathing. *Mamimi…*

Naota felt as though his heart had been ripped out.

Last night, Mamimi had come over, carrying her photos of Lord Canti, greeting him with a cheerful smile. It seemed so long ago.

Naota felt as if hundreds or thousands of years had passed. Whether something had happened in the ancient past or just yesterday, once the moment ended, it became a part of the inseparable past. "A long time ago" referred to something in the past that would be impossible to experience again. That was why Mamimi's innocent expression was nothing more than a distant memory to Naota now.

She smashed out her cigarette and stood up.

"Is your skirt dry?"

As soon as he asked, he regretted it so much that he felt like dying. Could he have said anything worse? At that moment, he was the most terrible person in the world.

Mamimi gave him a cold, sidelong glance, as if she didn't know him. Remaining silent, she dropped her game next to Naota. It was exactly the same gesture she'd used to discard her cigarette butt.

Naota picked it up and pressed the start button. He felt he wouldn't be able to stand the silence without it. Of course, the handheld contained the game Mamimi always played: Fire Starter. Naota, too, had played it when it first had come out, but he'd given up after a few times. It wasn't just Naota—most of the kids who'd bought it had given up on it almost immediately. It hadn't sold well, either. Fire Starter was a really weird game.

> *Welcome to Endsville, the devil town.*
>
> *It is a dark town, a city of devils.*
>
> *An invisible darkness has infected people's hearts. It eats away at the world and continues to spread. It won't stop until Endsville has consumed everything.*
>
> *This town makes real the previously unattainable desire for world conquest. Finally, all the world shall be like Endsville, and all the people in the world will be like Endsville's residents. Governments, businesses, and churches will become affiliated with Endsville, and all schools will become like Endsville schools, as well.*
>
> *Pride, obsessions pretending to be love, weak morals, distorted equality—this town is full of easy prey for the devils. It's packed with low-hanging fruit.*
>
> *Stop Endsville from further consumption!*
>
> *As apostle to the God of the Black Flame, Lord*

Cantido, you must stop the growth of Endsville, which knows not how to stop alone.

Take care! If you relax for a moment, then the devil town will enlarge.

The single weapon you have been given to halt this expansion is fire—the sacred, purging flame: matches, lighters, firebombs, explosives, and cigarettes. If it burns, you can use it. The devil town's weakness is fire.

Obtain the items, avoid the police, deceive the firefighters, and burn down the devil town.

Now, go forth and unleash the purifying flame!

However…

There is one thing you mustn't forget—one thing you cannot do. Despite the powerful flames at your control, you can't burn down everything at once. After all, if you burn down the entire town, you'll be left with nowhere to live.

And so, your battle can't be won. Over and over again, without end, you will burn the heartless town.

That is your mission, chosen one.

Go with the blessing of Lord Cantido, God of the Black Flames.

"Mamimi?"

Naota took his eyes off the screen to look around. While his attention had been diverted by the game, Mamimi had disappeared.

That…

Where could she have gone without her shoes?

Panicking, Naota stood up and ran after her, the portable game

player still clutched in his hand.

I don't need a game anymore. I know where I am right now. This is the devil town of Endsville.

In the evening, the shops in front of the train station were busy. On their way home from work, businessmen and office ladies hurried to make their purchases. Naturally, they were *devil* businessmen and office ladies, who'd been spit out by a *devil* company.

Once touched by Endsville, people could do nothing but live as part of Endsville. They could breathe only the air of Endsville, and they could eat only Endsville's food.

Devils wearing ties and devils wearing thick makeup; devils who didn't realize they were wearing masks; devils handing out leaflets; devils passing out election flyers; devils talking loudly; devils with fake faces, flipping burgers; devils selling cosmetics; devils crouched down outside the convenience store; fat devils; old devils; and baby devils, pushed in baby carriages—all of them were devils.

Mamimi started feeling sick, so she ran down a deserted alley.

I know.

I'm not an exception. I was born in Endsville, so the curse is in my body too.

However, I am different from the others. The other devils, they don't realize they're devils. They don't know they're in Endsville. Unwittingly, they spread Endsville across the world. That's how we're different: I'm the person who will stop the spread of Endsville, the one who will cleanse this town with holy flame and save the world. I've protected this worldy day after day, with that power.

I pray for the blessing of the God of the Black Flame! Lord Canti, I am your meek servant, the wielder of the black flame. Please, fill me with your holy spirit.

Wandering through the back alleys, Mamimi heard the stray cats

meow. Then, between the twilight buildings, she spotted the figure of a robot playing with the cats.

"Lord Canti."

She smiled.

It was the beginning of her holy life.

Naota used a pay phone on his street to try calling Mamimi's cell phone—but apparently, she'd turned off hers. No one answered at her home phone number, either.

She wasn't at Mabase Bridge, so he had no choice but to go and look for her.

Where have you gone?

It was time for dinner, but Naota knew he couldn't go home now. He had to look for Mamimi. He had to find her and be with her. Intuitively, he knew this.

He dearly regretted having lost sight of Mamimi just a little while ago. They'd been together a few moments. She'd been sitting right next to him.

It sank in that all he did was make mistakes. Mamimi was slipping away from him—a little farther today than yesterday, a little more now than then.

"You there."

When he looked up, he saw a policeman standing next to a patrol car.

"You live around here, don't you?" asked the policeman. "You haven't seen a suspicious-looking high school girl nearby recently, have you?"

A suspicious-looking high school girl…?

For a second, Naota's heart stopped.

"You've heard about the arsons around here," the cop continued. "What a horrible person… You don't know anything? You haven't heard any rumors about the culprit at school?"

"Hey," Naota heard another cop from the patrol car call, "look over there!"

The sky had turned red. It was a fire.

Mamimi…

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. No, I haven't heard any word from him. I recruited one of the enemy robots, but it's proving pretty useless."

Haruko was in Naota's room, apologizing and bowing. This was atypical behavior from her, given how outrageous, unruly, savage, and generally over-the-top she was.

She was alone in the room, with the exception of Miyu Miyu, who sat on the bed and looked out the window. The flames of a faraway blaze reflected in the cat's eyes.

"That…"

Haruko noticed the fire. She hurriedly opened the window, stepped outside, and walked out on the balcony.

She heard the sound of sirens coming from the river.

The fire was at a small boathouse, located on the riverside. It was an uninhabited two-story vessel.

Very quickly, a crowd of people formed around it. With the recent arson spate, everyone had become very jittery. Among the gathered people, there was much speculation that this, too, was arson. Usually, no one spent much time around this area, so everyone

wondered why there'd be an accidental fire in a place like that.

The small building burned splendidly.

It was fortunate there were no buildings nearby, but the flames were high—and powerful enough that complete destruction was unavoidable.

Sparks from the flames danced up into the sky.

Naota was part of the crowd; they were cast in a red glow. Stunned, he watched the blaze.

That's right. A real fire is hot like this.

Naota recalled the last fire he'd witnessed: It was the burning school Tasuku and he had watched together. Back then, Naota had been in kindergarten.

Fire… that's it!

Suddenly, Naota realized he'd remembered a place where Mamimi might be hiding. Maybe she'd be there now. Maybe she was crying.

At the charred site of the Mabase School, the wooden building's remains stood under a coating of ash. Nearby residents sometimes used the grounds to garden.

From the section of the old school garden located on the riverbank, the boathouse fire could be seen on the opposite shore. The river reflected the blaze, and the fire engines roared from across the way.

On this side, the school garden was as dark and quiet as a theater box. As if it were onstage, being watched by an audience, the fire across the river was a curiously unreal, fantastic scene.

Mamimi…

Just as Naota had guessed, she was there. The dark schoolyard was lit up with small red lights. It seemed she had put cigarettes in the

ground instead of candles.

What are you doing?

Illuminated by the fire from the other shore, Mamimi strangely swayed in time to some internal rhythm. When she stood, she reached her arms up to the sky; then, she crouched down, hanging her head to pray. It looked like a ritual dance.

No, maybe she intended it to be an actual ritual. When Naota looked closer, he could see Mamimi was drawing a magic symbol with her feet.

Nearby, Canti stood, unmoving. The robot looked like part of her ritual, but he was merely a passive observer.

"Mamimi," Naota called.

She looked back at him with cold eyes—the eyes of a witch, interrupted in the middle of casting her spell.

"Why did you come here?"

Naota tried passing her the game machine he still held. "Here."

"I don't need it anymore. It's yours."

He didn't have any response.

"Do you remember the fire here?" Mamimi was looking at the old school building. "No, you wouldn't remember. You were so small back then."

Though he didn't reply, Naota did remember that fire six years ago.

That was when everything had started.

It had been right before the start of spring.

That night, Naota nearly had fallen asleep when the town fire alarms began to ring.

Naota had asked his brother what the commotion was.

Tasuku opened the window to look outside and said, "A fire. It looks like the school. Let's go and see."

Sneaking out in the middle of the night was a big deal to the young Naota. He thought about going to see the fire with his brother, and his heart jumped a little. It was a rare chance for an evening adventure. Anyway, no matter what might happen, Tasuku was with him, so he would be okay.

Everyone was headed toward the fire. Mabase Elementary School—which Tasuku still attended back then, and where Naota would begin the following year—crackled with flames.

To Naota's young eyes, the fire was a glorious sight. He was excited by the waves of heat, which he hadn't experienced before.

It's so warm, isn't it, brother?

His brother told him not to say that kind of thing.

In the wide schoolyard, a large number of people gathered.

"Wait here for a minute," Tasuku said, disappearing into the crowd.

Suddenly, Naota felt uneasy. He wasn't that far from home, but he was uncomfortable being left alone in what felt like an alien world.

"Brother! Where are you, brother?" he yelled, running after Tasuku.

Despite his brother's orders, Naota ran after him, searching desperately. The fear that his brother had gone to the other side spurred him on.

How long had he looked around? The school building had two stories. In the back of the unburned part of the building, Naota finally found Tasuku: his safety blanket, his brother.

Tasuku was with a girl Naota didn't recognize. She was bigger than Naota, but smaller than Tasuku. It looked like she had been crying. When Tasuku spotted Naota, his brother gently stroked the girl's

hair and laughed that his little brother had followed him.

The girl, seeing him for the first time, turned to Naota and happily told him that Tasuku had saved her.

Saved her?

Naota didn't ask what Tasuku had saved her from.

The girl was Mamimi Samejima.

After that fire, Mamimi and Tasuku had started dating.

That's right, Naota remembered. *Mamimi was bullied back then, too. That's why she always said she hated school.*

Over the ensuing six years, he had forgotten about their first meeting. It all happened such a long time ago, and he'd come to think of Mamimi as nothing more than a carefree girl.

Could it be…?

Naota had a terrifying thought. How could he have forgotten until now? Back then, they'd said that the school fire had been arson, but they'd never caught the culprit.

"I hate it here," Mamimi said. "I'm glad it burned down. Besides, that's how I met Tasuku."

What was I thinking? Naota wondered to himself. *I didn't know. I didn't know anything.*

Of course, his brother had known everything. Otherwise, he wouldn't have been able to rescue her back then.

"Although it's all burned down, the ruins are still here."

Naota didn't reply.

The charred remains of the old school building had been left essentially intact. They stood there, illuminated by the fire.

Mamimi pointed to the burning boathouse and said, "Endsville is burning."

She wasn't talking to Naota. She was addressing Canti. "Now, Lord Canti, a kiss as my reward."

Looking absorbed, Mamimi walked toward Canti. Naota hadn't seen such a suggestive look in her eyes before.

Finally, Naota thought he understood what Mamimi wanted from Canti. At the time when he'd first met Mamimi here, his brother had comforted her and softly stroked her head. *That gesture probably supported Mamimi during hard times*.

In fact, that one memory had kept this seemingly carefree girl going, all this time.

Mamimi stood on her tiptoes to kiss Canti; her expression was that of a devotee, offering everything to her god. Naota felt a pain in his heart.

Mamimi, I… Mamimi, I…

"Ugh."

At that moment, there was a violent shuddering in Naota's forehead. His entire body stiffened as if he had been electrocuted.

Ba-dum… ba-dum… ba-dum…

His head started to throb.

The sirens and searchlights at the MM factory once again prepared for war.

Haruko, who was watching the factory from the corner of her eye, spurred on her beloved Vespa to the scene. "That" night was starting all over again.

Chapter 4

Naota heard an ear-splitting ringing and felt his feet leave the ground. His body was floating in the air, just as before.

Next up is…

As he expected, the horns burst through his bandana and extended —long and fat—from the back and front of his head. No, Naota already knew they weren't really horns. As the two protrusions had appeared on either side of his head, he'd predicted they'd each become another robot.

As he'd surmised, the protrusions emerged gradually: Several fat fingers, a hand, and then an entire arm appeared.

Not now, not here!

Similar to the previous time, the foreign objects made the surrounding area feel paralyzed. He felt no physical pain.

Naota had been prepared for this to happen. He'd experienced the strange feeling of having a heart in his forehead before. He thought if something still were residing in his head, he wanted it out immediately. However, he didn't want it to happen right here and now!

If the thing had to come out, he wanted it to happen somewhere no one would see it. He'd known the resulting robot could be a problem. If it weren't a harmless robot like Canti, but more like that violent arm-thing instead, then its emergence in an inopportune place might be fatal.

"Ew!"

Through the ringing in his ears, he heard Mamimi's repulsed exclamation.

Mamimi stepped back instinctively and looked at Naota with a

stunned expression. That was natural. Last time, Mamimi had lost consciousness and didn't remember anything. Seeing this mysterious wonder for the first time, it was no surprise that Mamimi freaked.

Why couldn't it have been anyone but Mamimi to see this? Or is this happening precisely because Mamimi is here?

After pushing through Naota's head to emerge on the outside, the alien objects both appeared to be part of another robotic arm. It was the same kind of arm as before. Of course, this time, it was the right arm. There was no mistaking it. This was the other half of that violent robot.

Run, Mamimi. It's dangerous! Naota wanted to scream, but to his frustration, the words wouldn't come out. Mamimi remained frozen to the spot, dumbstruck.

Canti stood nearby as before, watching what was unfolding.

As Naota's floating body tilted up, the robot's entire form appeared. The sight of a huge piece of machinery jumping from Naota's tiny head was unbelievably grotesque.

The new robot was gigantic. It was human-shaped, but larger than Canti, measuring about nine feet. Compared with Canti's slim proportions, this one had a thick, beefy body. Though humanoid, it would be more accurate to say it was shaped like a sumo wrestler rather than a normal person.

Its arms were odd. The right arm resembled the full manipulator, which had previously appeared. The left arm, however, was similar solely in its upper part. Attached to the left elbow was a disproportionately small metallic arm. This smaller limb appeared imbalanced against the sturdiness of the right arm. Because of the mismatch, the robot's silhouette was reminiscent of a crab.

That strange left arm probably was an emergency replacement for the part that Canti had cut off.

The robot caught sight of Canti through the sensor eye on its head. The gigantic robot began roaring, shaking everything in sight. Most

likely, it was delighted at the chance for revenge.

The MM logo had been carved on this one-armed robot, as well.

In the MM Mabase factory, the host computer once again began receiving battle reports.

> *«MMR Class [J].RH appears in Mabase city. 19:57.*
>
> *MMR Class [K].001 ATOMSK is caught at close distance.19:57.*
>
> *[K] ATOMSK displays no reaction. 19:57.*
>
> *RH, receiving no reaction and not recognizing the merit of capture, readies battle plan for ultimate destruction. 19:57.*
>
> *Permission granted. 19:57.*
>
> *Battle begins. 19:57.*
>
> *Good luck to RH in executing battle strategy. 19:57.»*

The gigantic robot appeared to be starting a fight with Canti.

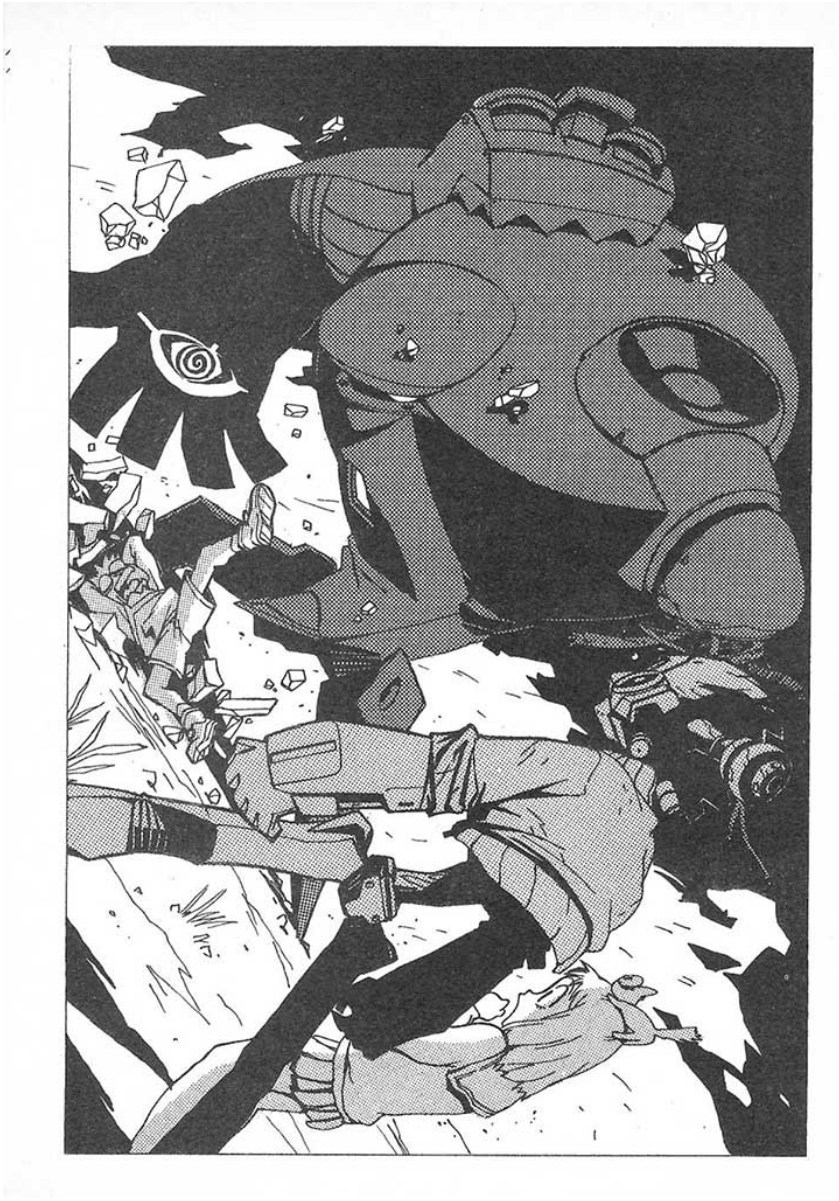
Its feet remained stuck, however, bogged down in Naota. For some reason, the robot's feet were still in Naota's head, and it couldn't get free.

"Ugh!"

In pain, Naota grabbed at his forehead, desperately trying to rid himself of the robot. As if it were disgusted by a piece of sticky eggshell from its birth process, the huge robot lifted its foot and shook off Naota. Consequently, Naota was flicked away.

With a scream, Naota fell to the schoolyard violently. Fortunately, the anti-gravitational force generated by the robot's appearance

hadn't dissipated completely. This eased the impact, and Naota escaped with no broken bones—more or less, safe and sound.



For a moment, Naota thought, *Thank God*. His relief proved premature, however; in the next second, he was hit by a bike and

thrown aside. Of course, the bike was Haruko's.

"Waaah!"

"Takkun!" Haruko yelled, stopping her Vespa.

Naota mumbled. Although he had escaped unscathed once more, these accidents, one after another, had taken their toll on his mental state.

Haruko turned to the new robot, enraged (already having forgotten she herself had run over Naota), and grunted, "Look what you did to Takkun!"

The formerly one-armed robot immediately assumed a battle stance; with its giant right fist, it punched Canti.

Canti collapsed with a loud metallic crash.

The weight differential between the two was so immense that the impact was like a giant truck hitting a bicycle. In terms of brute strength, the one-armed robot far surpassed Canti.

Trampling on the fallen Canti, the big robot looked like it was enjoying its revenge.

> *«How do you like that, [K].001 ATOMSK? Last time, I was careless and let my right arm get crushed; but in a proper fight, you're no match for me.»*

Canti remained completely motionless, trampled. It had no will to fight back and lay there, passive.

Mamimi screamed.

Up until now, she'd been shocked; finally, she forced herself to acknowledge the frightening reality unfolding before her. Watching the terrifying one-armed robot, she collapsed as if she were a broken doll.

A demon—it's the Endsville demon. Because I tried to burn the town, I angered it, and now it's come here…

The one-armed demon picked up Canti's legs, swung the robot around in a semicircle, and flung it to the ground. The entire motion was a well-programmed fight sequence.

Canti's body slammed down a few feet from where Mamimi sat.

The one-armed robot ignored any surrounding people. It exhibited a single-minded malice. After finishing with Canti, perhaps it intended to annihilate the people there, too.

"Mamimi!"

When he regained control over his body, Naota ran to Mamimi, refusing to think of anything else.

This was the worst possible situation. The robot from his head was going to hurt Mamimi. There was no way he could let that happen!

"Uwaaah!" Haruko, guitar in hand, activated the manual generator on the instrument's back. She attempted to hit the one-armed robot.

The robot seized the guitar with its hand.

Haruko's instrument glowed; where it touched the robots arm, blue and white lights sparked. (Perhaps, during this exchange, another battle occurred simultaneously in some complicated dimension that couldn't be seen by human eyes.) The robot desperately blocked the guitar as Haruko pushed down.

It appeared that Haruko Haruhara really wasn't an ordinary girl.

As the robot guarded against Haruko, it also continued attacking Canti from behind. The air twisted, and the whole area was filled with a disquieting vibration.

Suddenly, Canti squeaked and sank to the ground.

It was as though an invisible foot had stepped on Canti's back. By the looks of it, the enemy robot had utilized some kind of medical machinery as a weapon.

In medical science, hyperbaric oxygen therapy is a treatment in

which patients are placed within a high-pressure environment to change the oxygen levels in their blood. This robot was equipped with a pressure-changing unit that could increase environmental pressure at will. That seemed to be the weapon it now employed. Canti's body was attacked repeatedly by high-pressure pinpoints, as if it had been hit everywhere by bullets. The assault was merciless.

As Canti let out a scream and a squeak, Naota and Mamimi grew terrified. Mamimi quivered in Naota's arms, unable to move. The one-armed robot's violent attacks would be directed toward them soon.

I can't take this anymore.

Naota could do nothing but hold the frightened Mamimi. It was maddening to know that he was so useless.

"Mamimi…" Naota whispered.

Canti simply had been absorbing its opponent's attacks; now, Canti's monitor suddenly lit up with a strange light.

Withstanding its enemy's high-pressure attacks, Canti stood and opened up a section of its armor. In the next second, it extended both its arms, seized Naota, and inserted him into its body. The lid closed.

In a flash, Naota had been enveloped by Canti's body, vanishing.

Watching, Mamimi shook in terror. "You ate him."

Indeed, it looked as though Canti had somehow eaten up Naota.

Where am I?

Naota considered the possibility that he was dead, which would explain why he was in an utterly dark space.

As he drifted through the darkness, however, Naota knew he still had his limbs and body.

If I'm still alive, then where am I?

His memories were jumbled up by the shock of what had happened. Finally, he remembered Canti's body had swallowed him.

Common sense would dictate that Canti's slim form couldn't possibly accommodate Naota's body. However, given that an entire robot had come out of Naota's head, common sense wasn't really an issue anymore.

Yes, I'm probably inside Canti's body: However, this isn't the time to float around in darkness. Outside, that horrific robot might be attacking Mamimi! So, what do I do now?

Naota reached out with both hands, trying to feel around, but his fingers encountered nothing.

"Heeeeey!"

When he screamed, his voice disappeared into the endless black. There was no telling how far the darkness extended. He didn't hear an echo; the shout simply was swallowed up.

From behind, something suddenly pierced Naota's head.

"Huh?"

One by one, his limbs and his organs froze; he completely lost control over his body.

He started to hear the ominous sound of something operating around him.

GON… GON… GON… GON… GON… GON… GON… GON…

Afraid of being caught in giant, rotating gears, Naota trembled.

«[K], ATOMSK shows reaction. 20:01.»

After swallowing Naota, Canti turned around in the next instant. It delivered a powerful flying kick to the one-armed robot. That devil, which had been locked in battle with Haruko, collapsed.

Canti carefully braced itself with a powerful command presence, as

if it were an entirely different robot. In fact, Canti's outer appearance was changing.

Mamimi and Haruko watched the transformation.

After displaying several incomprehensible signal patterns on its monitor, the entire body color began flickering, changing to different hues. From navy to silver to green to purple—it shifted into these bright colors to a dizzying effect. Finally, it settled into a bright crimson.

Canti's body made a feral noise. Something was happening on the inside, in addition to its exterior changes.

Haruko, who had watched what was happening to Canti, glanced at the bracelet on her left arm. The chain link reacted like a magnet, pointing to Canti.

Haruko grinned. This was, apparently, a delightful development.

"Idiot!" Mamimi screamed, running to Canti and beating its back with her fists. "You're no god! Why did you eat Takkun? Stupid robot! Give back Takkun!"

She pleaded with all her might. She was bawling. It was the first time since the night she'd met Naota that she had let anyone but Tasuku see her tears. Suddenly, Mamimi stopped beating Canti and looked up at the robot, surprised.

The robot, now a crimson color, tenderly patted her head. Softly, as if it were offering her consolation, it said, "You're a good girl, aren't you?"

Mamimi was struck dumb by Canti's unexpected show of sympathy. That moment reminded Mamimi of something that she always had wanted but hadn't been able to get.

Suddenly, Canti's arm quickly moved her away, as if to signal her to get down.

The one-armed robot stood, readying its finishing attack. Its sensor eye locked Canti in its sights. What attack was it planning this time?

Its whole body groaned as it prepped itself.

Canti, however, was faster.

The second it had pushed Mamimi back, the whole robot—not merely its color—transformed. Although it had been an android mere seconds earlier, Canti now had morphed into a giant crimson cannon. The body resembled some strange, scientific weapon; this was Canti's self-propelled gun mode.

A red laser locked in on the one-armed robot. A shot issued from the cannon's mouth. With tremendous noise, it fired an energy cannonball.

Haruko and Mamimi sensed the attack ripple throughout their entire bodies; they felt the blast in the pits of their stomach.

The cannonball headed straight for the one-armed robot, piercing its armor. Upon passing through its enemy's body, the cannonball changed directions, flew up into the sky, and returned to the gun-mode Canti.

Not about to let this opportunity to finish the fight slip away, Haruko swung her time-space interference weapon at the enemy robot, which now had a gaping hole. She couldn't afford any carelessness; this robot's parts could operate as autonomous weapons, which the severed arm previously had demonstrated.

This time, the defenseless robot was hit by the light-emitting guitar. It flew backward, smashing into the side of the wooden building. By all appearances, Haruko's guitar was a super weapon: The entire one-armed robot sparked a brilliant white—and then exploded. A huge pillar of flame rose up, incinerating the remains of the school.

Canti returned to its original form and protected Mamimi from the blast. Its body had changed back from crimson to the original metallic navy; from inside, sounds in its belly could be heard.

Naota's body was excreted from the robot's bottom.

"Ouch."

Although Naota seemed almost unconsciousness as he emerged, he returned to his senses immediately. For some reason, his face had numerous scratches. Looking closely, his entire body was covered in little grazes.

Seeing Naota, Mamimi crinkled her nose, saying, "Takkun, you're all sticky. And you smell."

Naota's nicked-up body was covered in sticky goo. He definitely had an acidic smell.

Looking around, Naota grasped the situation. "So, that nasty robot was beaten?"

The wooden school building was burning ferociously. The flames were quite a bit bigger than those of the fire on the river's other side.

"The remains were blown to bits, too, huh?" Naota murmured.

The ruins made by Mamimi years earlier, which had sat untouched all this time, now were burning into nothingness.

Suddenly, Naota's ears perked up. He heard a siren. Fire trucks and patrol cars were approaching.

"Hey, you two, what are you doing? It's time to hit the road." Haruko was already on her Vespa, ready to flee.

Canti, standing nearby, rose noiselessly and slipped into the evening darkness. Apparently, it could be a shrewd robot sometimes.

Naota and Mamimi, illuminated by the schoolhouse fire, regarded each other. Soiled with tears and cuts, the two of them looked into each other's faces, both completely devoid of expression.

The patrol car was getting closer.

"Let's go," said Naota, taking Mamimi's cold hand. They ran toward the Vespa.

Mamimi is here right now.

They climbed onto Haruko's scooter. Naota sat in front; Mamimi straddled the back, clinging to Haruko. Three people on one scooter —that alone was enough for the police to pull them over. There was no way they could let Mamimi get caught, though. As the three-manned Vespa drove away, the night wind stung Naota's wounds.

Despite that night's events, nothing had changed in his relationship with Mamimi. She still loved Tasuku, and Naota still was different from his brother. He had known all that from the start, though.

Although he knew he was just a substitute, Naota thought, *I want to be next to Mamimi for as long as possible*.

"Pull over!" ordered a patrol car.

Dammit! Had they been caught? Each time Mamimi and Naota tried to move forward, something else got in the way.

"No-brain, you'd better hold on tight!"

Enjoying their predicament, Haruko grinned and accelerated to the max.

The Vespa cut through the night town at light speed.

> *«Mission Accomplished 20:05. Continue to FLCL 2 20:05.»*

Commentary

Hiroki Sato (Fooly Cooly Producer)

When reading books, please do so in a well-lit room, keeping a good distance between your eyes and the book.

Reading for extended periods of time may damage your eyesight.

Reading on a moving train has been known to cause motion sickness.

I'm kidding.

I didn't really have to write that stuff, did I? After all, you buy books and read them however you choose. Yeah, that's true. Great, isn't it? This time, we have a medium that you can appreciate however you like. So, why isn't the FLCL OVA (for sale and rental) like this?

Leaving that topic aside…

A boy hero, three female companions, robots—in other words, it's the archetypical "Japanime" story. The set-up is already very familiar, so I decided to twist it quite a lot. The Akihabara district populace demanded, "Please, make it all GAINAX-weird so that the old men who follow subcultures, all the Shibuya teenagers, and the girls who read cute comics won't get it." I kept my end of the deal—but just this once.

When I said I wanted to "twist it," Kazuya Tsurumaki did so without hesitation. Well, actually it took almost a year's worth of hesitation. We didn't want it to be limited by genre. Was it full of gags or was it serious? Was it Sci-Fi or was it comedy? To quote Haruko, "Whether it's a lie or the truth, does it really matter?" We described it as embodying Zeitgeist—"the feeling of now." Then, we were told that phrase was lame, and that people thought it would read like any other young adult manga.

Leaving that topic aside…

As each episode was a little longer than twenty minutes, if we threw in too many gags, it would have become utter nonsense. Or there might have been people who wouldn't understand anything from it and would say, "This is boring." So, we kept it relatively normal. And we decided to do a novelization—an additional link in the greater media mix.

Sharing media is easier now, and one work can have a big impact on other works out there. An element of the novel hints at one of the many interpretations of the anime, but what's wonderful is that the novel is also a completely independent work in its own right. Actually, I've come to realize just recently that a novel, as the medium that further expands the width of our imaginations, might be the most suitable kind of media.

Despite the random jokes, within the Sci-Fi anime genre, you want to keep telling the story whether you've decided on a deep meaning or it never develops one. You might tell the story and it suddenly becomes boring; but if you don't continue until the very end, people often won't understand.

This sure isn't your typical Sci-Fi.

This sure has serious gags.

This sure is juvenile.

We were extremely fortunate to have found a writer who could conjure up the right mix of Sci-Fi and juvenility. Mister Enokido participated in each step of our planning.

So, for all those who've started reading the book by going to this commentary first (Director Tsurumaki definitely will fall into this group), I hope you enjoy Mister Enokido's delicate, creative touch. For those of you who have finished and are looking for the extras, I'd like it if you watched the anime after this. For those of you who've already watched the anime, I guarantee that you will have various new reactions, such as slapping your knee and saying, "I see now!" or "I still don't get it." It's that kind of work.

Leaving that topic aside…

In the beginning, Tsurumaki's original plot had many ideas that were very interesting when expressed in words but hard to express in art. The visual directors—Yoshiyuki Sadamoto, Tadashi Hiramatsu, and Tsurumaki himself—shouted on many occasions, "This is hard to draw!" (And they still are yelling about this now.) I can't thank Mister Enokido enough for patiently reading many revised manuscripts with difficult and abstract images, and then going back to novelize it. (At this very moment, he's still on chapters five and six!) Without you, Director Tsurumaki and I probably would not be alive right now.

Please, enjoy the second and third volumes, as well.